THE CHECKERED FLAG

JOHN MERSEREAU

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BY

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CHAPTER I

FROM a commanding position beside one of the titanic multiple drill presses, Jack Reese kept a weather eye on all the complexity of ingenious machinery and skilled man-power which formed that industrial marvel known, prosaically enough, as Corbin Motors' Machine Shop. There was something almost paternal at times in the roving, restless glance of his smiling blue eyes. For, in a sense, they were all his, these perfectly synchronized mechanical giants — at least in so far as his was the responsibility for the efficient functioning of the department.

The young shop superintendent smiled with boyish satisfaction. Everything was going perfectly. It looked as if this might be a record month, even. And why not? He had the latest machinery, good men — the best in the world, he told himself. His low labor turnover had always been a source of amazement and envy to other department heads, and his crew were loyal to a man.

He turned abruptly. An office messenger, wary of the grinding, roaring machinery, was calling to him from the doorway.

"Mr. Kline would like to see you immediately in his office, Mr. Reese," the boy repeated his message. "At once," he added, as if his superior had stressed that point.

Reese nodded and hurried off to get his coat. But the satisfied smile had suddenly left his face. As General Manager of Corbin Motors, Barton Kline might be the czar of his little universe, he reflected; but since he had come west to assume the position six months before, Kline had certainly shown a singular lack of tact for one so highly touted as an executive genius. He was autocratic and domineering, and already had clashed with Jack on several minor issues. And Reese, as he pulled on his worn tweed coat, had a premonition that this present summons — unnecessarily urgent, it seemed, for ordinary routine matters — omened an unpleasant interview of some sort.

Not that the blond, rangy-built superintendent was particularly concerned about himself. But he foresaw in the manager's continual petty interference in the various departments an influence that was bound to eventually demoralize the plant's entire personnel. And Reese took a boundless pride in the unexampled success of the great enterprise which he had helped in maturing from a weak and not particularly promising infancy.

For nearly five years he had been superintendent of the machine shop. Before that he had been its foreman; and still earlier, a skilled mechanic. But

always in the employ of old Joel Corbin. He had, in fact, practically grown up in the plant — and with it. As an apprentice, he had lived through those dubious first years before the Corbin had wedged out a place for itself as one of the foremost cars in the fifteen-hundred-dollar class in the country; when it was generally agreed in financial circles that Joel Corbin, despite his millions made in California oil and realty, was a fool to attempt to manufacture a popular-priced machine on the Pacific Coast.

Yet in little over a decade the impossible had become a fact. The home ranch of Tres Arroyos, with its thousands of fertile acres overlooking the blue Pacific, had been metamorphosed into the thriving Southern California seaport of the same name by the magic touch of millions. Engineers laid a breakwater along a reef and blasted out a wide channel to a snug deep-water harbor in its lee. Experts designed the factory, a model of its kind. Comfortable workmen's cottages with wide, tree-shaded yards sprang up by the hundreds. And with the opening of the Panama Canal, Corbin's "Folly" leaped, overnight almost, into the most sensational money maker in the automotive industry.

And Jack Reese, hardly more than a gangly, big-framed boy at the time, had prospered along with his employer in those first hectic, money-mad years of the World War. His unusual abilities had been remarked by Corbin's efficiency

experts, and he went to a shop foreman's job on his twenty-second birthday.

But after six months of that, while the Four Horsemen rode rough-shod over Europe, he suddenly resigned and enlisted in a French flying escadrille. Then, with several months of that and a year of agonizing inaction as instructor at a Texas flying field to mature him, he returned to Tres Arroyos — something of a hero despite his modest disclaimers — to find the post of shop superintendent awaiting him. Corbin happened to be one of those exceptional employers who "remembered."

Such was the considerable record Reese had piled up for himself. But in his rapid rise, despite the knowledge that he had always "made good" as he progressed, he had never lost sight of the fact that he owed much to the kindly disposed old land baron who had taken an individual interest in him. Consequently, as he went to answer Kline's summons, it was with a feeling of regret that Corbin had chosen for his chief executive one so inimical to the plant's welfare in general.

He was treated to yet another example of this fact when he entered the manager's palatial office. Kline, sitting at his mahogany desk ostensibly busy with some papers, answered Reese's greeting with only a surly grunt, without so much as asking the younger man to be seated. Jack dropped into a chair, none the less, and waited with a half-smile

of amusement for Kline to run through the fussy little ritual that prefaced every consultation with Corbin employees.

A man of no little importance was Barton Kline, but, unfortunately, a vain one. At thirty-five years of age, he had plunged his way to one of the biggest executive positions in the country through sheer force of will, boundless ambition and energy, and a sort of catch-as-catch-can genius at finding the weak point in a business obstacle and smothering it forthwith. He was not a tall man, but thick-set and virile. His hair was of that indeterminate color generally described as sandy; and he affected a close-cropped mustache which he tweaked nervously at times in a rather amusing and futile gesture. His face reflected power and that sort of heavy masculine attractiveness which captivates a certain type of woman. But the effect was marred by blinking, hazel eyes, prematurely creased at the corners, with heavy discolored pouches beneath.

After an impressive clearing of his throat, he glanced up.

"Oh, yes — Reese," he said, in a resonant, condescending voice, as if he had forced his mind from more important considerations. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, but I guess the shop won't go to rack and ruin, entirely, because of your absence, eh?" He laughed dryly, brushing an imaginary mote from his immaculate serge, while his glance rested momentarily on a grease smudge

on Jack's rumpled Norfolk. "But I hope you're getting caught up on the gears for the 'four' again. You nearly ran us high and dry last week, remember, because of your shortage there," he warned. "Mr. Corbin was quite put out when he heard about it — quite put out."

Reese pulled forward in his seat.

"My department is operating at top speed — as always, Mr. Kline," he said crisply. "We anticipate a record month. As for that shortage you speak of, I've already explained to you that I made the requisition for the blanks in plenty of time. And I'll be glad to show Mr. Corbin the record sheets if he's inclined to blame me in any way."

"No, no! that won't be necessary at all, Reese." Kline quickly raised a deprecatory hand. "Mr. Corbin understands the facts — I've explained all that to him. And I only mentioned it impersonally." He shifted his glance. "What I wish to discuss with you now is entirely another matter, a matter of business ethics so to speak — "

"Business ethics?" Reese filled in the pause, puzzled.

"Yes, exactly, Reese," Kline shot out. "The question as to whether or not an employee of the Corbin plant has the moral right to conduct experiments in motor manufacture without placing the results, if of any importance, at the disposal of his employer. Perhaps 'ethics' was a poorly chosen word. 'Loyalty' might put it more simply."

"You mean to infer that I am disloyal to the

Corbin interests, do you?" Jack inquired quickly.

Kline pinched at his mustache.

"You are experimenting with a new type of motor, I am informed," was his equivocal reply. "That is a fact, isn't it?"

"It is."

"And you are confiding the results to no one?"

"To no one but my partner in the work; that's all perfectly true," Reese nodded.

"Well, then —" Kline shrugged and raised his bushy eyebrows. "What is one to infer from that?"

"Well, what do you infer from it, Mr. Kline?" Jack asked softly.

"I infer nothing," the manager stated. "I will make my inferences after you have outlined the course you intend to pursue."

"Then let me ask you a question first, Mr. Kline. Is my work here as shop superintendent satisfactory?"

"In the main — yes."

"Then that seems to me to pretty well answer your question also. I give every moment of my working day to Corbin Motors. You say my work is satisfactory. That ends my obligations to the company, I think. If I choose to try to better myself in my own leisure time, without detriment to my service here at the plant, that is my own affair. If I choose to experiment with a new type of motor — and that's exactly what I'm doing, I'll admit fairly — I can't see of any conceivable claim you

or Mr. Corbin have on it. I'm not employed in either the research or experimental department, so I'm justly entitled to whatever I produce." Reese stood up, his shoulders squaring. "That's the way I look at it.

"If my motor pans out the big success I believe it is destined to be, it will revolutionize the motor-making industry, Mr. Kline. The Corbin motor, good as it is, is only ten per cent efficient — and that goes for every motor on the market today. Their pistons travel twenty inches, on the basis of one explosion to every four strokes, to deliver five inches of push to the gross weight of the machine. I haven't solved that yet; but I have been able so far to cut out over a hundred pounds of deadweight from a standard-sized motor by overcoming the necessity of water cooling. I'm working on an anti-friction bearing now that will be equally revolutionary — if successful."

Jack paused, smiling sheepishly as he realized how boastful his enthusiasm might sound. "I didn't mean to go into the details, Mr. Kline, but that, in general, is what my partner and I are trying to do. And if we succeed, I'll tell you plainly that we intend to keep whatever profit there may be from it to ourselves — all of it. You asked me for my position. There it is."

The manager's eyes, bright and alert and calculating a moment before, now blinked inscrutably.

"And I suppose that when this wonderful contraption of yours is perfected you will dispose of

it to the highest bidder — for several millions, perhaps?" he suggested, with what seemed half a sneer.

"No." Reese shook his head positively. "The patents will not be for sale at any price."

"Not for sale, eh?" Kline smiled his amusement. "Why, Geneva Motors might give you a fortune for them to get ahead of the Corbin. They manufacture six different cars, you know, and they could afford to pay any price at all — if you happened to have something they wanted."

Jack cast a keen glance at his superior. Barton Kline, he knew, had given up a promising future with the Geneva — the most powerful motor trust in America — to accept Joel Corbin's offer to manage his interests. And Reese had more than once wondered, from an unguarded word or action now and then, if Kline's breach with his previous employers was as complete as he took pains to assert. But now there was nothing in Kline's half-smiling expression to suggest that he intended his remark about selling out to the rival corporation to be taken seriously. And Jack's sudden suspicion was forgotten as quickly as it had come.

"No, the patents won't be for sale," he repeated. "And, anyway, they couldn't be applied practicably in their present form to a moderately priced car. So," he grinned good-naturedly, "you can rest assured that the Corbin won't suffer from any competition with the Geneva rattletraps equipped with Reese-Dejeans motors."

"Dejeans?" Kline echoed. "Is that the name of your partner in the — ah — venture, then?"

"Why, yes — "

"What a strange coincidence," Kline interposed blandly. "I have been intending to have a talk with you about a certain man of that name, but I'd completely overlooked it until you called it to my mind just now." He stepped to the door of the outer office and called to his secretary: "Massey, will you please get those Dejeans papers out of the file and bring them in to me?"

He returned to his desk and dropped heavily into his chair.

"I'm glad we've come to understand each other about this motor proposition, Reese," he resumed genially. "Of course, knowing your splendid record, I never doubted your loyalty to the plant. But I'm in the difficult position of having to assure myself on such ticklish points, whatever way the chips fall. However, I see now that the Corbin interests won't be jeopardized in any way by your experiments; and I'm always glad to see a man trying to better himself." He held out his hand. "So all the luck in the world to you, Reese. I hope you make a billion!"

A sudden wave of shame swept over the shop superintendent. After this wholehearted expression of good will, he felt that he had misjudged Kline and wronged him with baseless suspicions. And the thought flashed over him, guiltily, that perhaps a mean personal jealousy — his own — lay

at the bottom of all their past differences. Not that he envied the manager his superior position at all. It was something more intimate than that, something impossible and unvoiced, but a subject for secret dreams none the less. In Tres Arroyos, as in practically all of the open-handed West, social lines were not too rigidly drawn; and Jack, well-read and personable and with the glamour of his war record about him, had found on his return from Overseas not the least of his pleasure in the close friendship of old Joel Corbin's vivacious daughter, Rita. That is, until Barton Kline had arrived a half year before. Urbane, polished, and something of a man of the world, Kline had captured the girl's interest from the start. And Jack wondered now if he had unconsciously permitted such an unworthy cause to embitter him against his superior.

He shook Kline's hand heartily, his thin lips parting in a friendly smile.

"Thanks," he said impulsively. "I'm glad, too, Mr. Kline, that we — "

At this juncture, Kline's tall, stoop-shouldered private secretary interrupted, bringing in the papers the manager had asked for. His narrow-set eyes, placed on either side of a hooked nose, darted a furtive, searching glance from Kline to the shop superintendent while proffering the papers.

"Here is all the data we have on Dejeans, sir," he fawningly addressed the manager. "That is to say, I haven't yet got the reports from all our

sources of information. I mean, that is to say, that I — "

"That will be all for now, Massey." Kline nodded brusquely toward the door, turning back to Reese when the soft-footed secretary had unwillingly retired. "I'm really indebted to Massey for this data on Dejeans," he went on. "As you know, we're constantly on the watch to weed out undesirable characters in our employ — "

"In our employ?" Jack repeated, alertly.

"Yes. This Marcel Dejeans seems to have slipped by our employment manager somehow and gotten into your department. And from what Massey has ferreted out about him, he's certainly been fortunate to have gotten past the immigration authorities, let alone to have had the nerve to worm his way into the plant by masquerading as an honest mechanic. I'm surprised that you didn't run him to earth yourself, Reese. He's been with us nearly a year now. He's a bad egg, an ex-convict — a French Apache — with a record on the Paris Prefecture books that would make a Sing Sing incorrigible blush with shame — "

"Just a minute, please," Reese interrupted intensely. "Marcel Dejeans is an ex-convict, you're right, but he's reformed. I'll vouch for that."

"Nonsense!" Kline scoffed. "Once a thief, always a thief!"

"You're wrong, I tell you," Jack burst out. "Dejeans is absolutely on the level — a man all through. He was an Apache, yes, until the French

Government had the foresight to turn his daring and courage to a good purpose. He's a French Ace. Moreover, he received the Legion medal, first rank — Foch pinned it on him, himself — along with an unconditional pardon. And he was cited for bravery several times afterward. Before the U. S. stepped into the mess, we flew wing to wing. He saved my life. Not only once, but several times. I persuaded him to come into the plant. He's a mechanical genius and the best friend I have. And I'm proud to say so. Furthermore, he's my partner in the motor experiments we spoke of. That's how much confidence I have in Marcel Dejeans, ex-convict and Paris Apache if he is!"

Kline drummed the fingers of one hand on his desk, and pinched nervously at his mustache with the other.

"I'm sorry for your sake, Reese," he said coldly. "But as I told you before, my position calls for occasional unpleasant decisions. I have no choice in this case. The Corbin employees must be protected. Dejeans, if he is the skilled man you say he is, will have no trouble in getting work elsewhere. But his criminal record makes it impossible for us to keep him here. He will have to go at once — tonight. That's final!"

Reese sprang from his chair.

"Very well," he said hotly. "He goes — and I go with him! You can consider this a notification of my resignation, Mr. Kline — to take effect

as soon as a suitable successor can be found. And the sooner, the better it will please me!"

Barton Kline blinked his eyes rapidly to hide a quick gleam of satisfaction.

"As you wish, Reese. I think I can promise to relieve you by the end of the week. A good shop superintendent shouldn't be hard to find," he added maliciously, and bent down over a sheaf of papers to signify that the interview was at an end.

And Reese, leaving, relieved his boyish anger by slamming behind him forever the portal of Corbin Motors' sacred managerial sanctum.

CHAPTER II

But this feeling of flaming resentment and anger endured for only the barest moment. It was followed almost immediately by a sensation nearly approaching dismay. Poignantly, Reese realized what it would mean to him to leave the Corbin plant. He was part of it, he felt; he had watched it grow and develop to the great enterprise it was with something of the prideful emotion of a parent for a successful son. He had learned his trade there after finishing his school education. And who as well as he could keep the men so satisfied and enthusiastic and the shop machinery running so smoothly?

He smiled wryly, recalling the old saw about at least two men being able to fit every pair of shoes. It was true, doubtless. Some toady such as Kline's fawning secretary, Sam Massey, would probably be given charge of the shops, and production would be kept up to par in some fashion. Corbin Motors wouldn't go to the wall simply because one such insignificant cog as Jack Reese left its efficient mechanism. For the factory personnel, as well as the product it made, had been adapted for the quick replacement of interchangeable parts.

With calmer thought, too, Jack was shrewd enough to see that he had played directly into Kline's hand by quitting. The manager, discover-

ing the close friendship existing between him and the ex-Apache, had easily enough stacked the cards; and Jack had fallen into the trap quite as any other loyal-hearted man would have done.

Jack shrugged as he reëntered the din of the shop. He had taken the only course left open to him, and perhaps it was all for the best. It was evident enough that the manager wanted to get rid of him, and it was better to quit of his own free will than to be discharged on some trumped-up pretext or other.

And aside from his attachment for the plant and the men in his department, Reese really felt little regret about quitting. Without being at all miserly, he had managed to save up three or four thousand dollars in the past five years. He had no debts or dependents. And with full time now available to apply to the completing of the Reese-Dejeans motor plans, another month or two should finish the task easily. Of course he would probably have to borrow then to put through his patents and manufacture the first demonstration car. That would take more capital than he had. But old Joel Corbin was president of the Tres Arroyos Bank, and if the case was well put he would doubtless approve the application for a comparatively small loan. All in all, the future held little to worry about and much for pleasant anticipation.

Armed with this philosophic outlook, Reese hunted up Marcel Dejeans. He found the little Frenchman utterly absorbed in the operation of his

lathe. A light touch on the shoulder, however, and the ex-Apache spun round in a flash. His frail-looking shoulders crouched ever so slightly and his shrewd black eyes — absolutely fearless — held the cold, opaque sheen of polished obsidian.

"Well, well," Jack grinned affectionately, "what's biting the 'Crazy Ace' today? You look all heated up, Marcel."

A sudden warmth diffused Dejean's sharp eyes. The tense muscles rippled into relaxation all over his slight, dynamic body.

"*Parbleu,* it ees Jacques, eh?" he replied, in a sharply accented, nasal voice. "Me, I thought it was again zose peeg, Massey — "

"Massey was here while I was gone?" Jack asked.

"*Oui.* He came wiz ze *gendarme* to ask ze questions."

"And you answered them, I suppose — told them politely what they wanted to know?" Reese inquired, smiling inwardly.

"*Sacre* damn, yes!" Marcel grinned. "I told zem to go to hell. And zey went queeck enough, too!"

"Good for you, Marcel. Perhaps that wasn't quite tactful, but Massey has no business butting in on this department — at least, not until I'm through here."

"Through?" Dejeans demanded. "You are queeting, zen?"

"Something like that, Marcel. I had a little

run-in with Kline over — ah — the hiring of help. And the upshot of it was that I handed in my resignation."

The little Frenchman spun around decisively and threw off the power on his lathe.

"*Voila!* zen I am through, too," he cried, with an expressive gesture of his tapering, sensitive fingers. "Me, I have nevair like' zis *boche,* Kline. And maybe you gave him ze knockout when you queet, eh?" he asked, hopefully.

"No. I could hardly do that under the circumstances. In fact, I agreed to stay on until he could find another man for the job — probably till the end of the week." But in Dejeans' prompt loyalty, Reese saw a fortunate chance to get the ex-Apache out of the shop without actually telling him of his discharge and the relation his own resignation bore to it. "However," he continued quickly, "probably it might be a good idea for you to turn in your time tonight, Marcel, and get our work room cleaned up. If you're game, I'd like to put in full time on our experiments and plans from now on and finish them up with a bang. But you'd better finish out the day here anyhow. There are only a couple of hours more, and your place can't be filled before morning."

Dejeans reluctantly geared in the lathe belt once more and resumed his work, while Reese went on through the department on one of his regular inspections. Efficient to the last, the shop superintendent disliked seeing an idle bit of machinery.

And that, particularly, had caused him to ask Dejeans to finish out the afternoon.

However, had he seen Massey's narrow face glance in the door while he was at the far end of the shop, he might have regretted this thrifty impulse. The ferret features of Kline's secretary showed only an instant, while he pointed with marked satisfaction and anticipation toward the busy little Frenchman at his lathe. Then the door closed softly — a habit which not even the roaring machinery could nullify — and Massey was gone.

Shortly thereafter Jack hurried back to that section of the shop, anxiety written large on his face. The machinery drowned all human sounds, but from a distance he could see that something was considerably amiss. Men were craning over and around their work to see, and two or three of the oilers were even hastening toward a point of convergence roughly at the spot where Dejeans' lathe stood.

On arriving, Jack found the little Apache squirming in the bear embrace of a hulking young giant, whose expensive cravat was sadly awry and whose strong but dissipated features bore more than one trace of Marcel's grimy fist.

"What's the idea, Corbin?" Reese demanded coldly. "If you've had trouble with any of my crew, why didn't you come to me about it? Let this man go now — at once. We can thrash out your differences in my office without throwing the whole shop into a turmoil."

But young Gordon Corbin, silver-spoon son of an indulgent multi-millionaire father, had discovered some time before that it was much simpler to take hold than to let go! Desperately he clung to the dynamic Marcel while panting out an explanation.

"I ordered your man to go out and pump up a flat tire on my car, and he insulted me. I — ah — cuffed at him for his impudence, and he lit into me like a pack of wildcats. I didn't want to hurt him, naturally — "

"It served you right," Reese cut in sharply. "I've asked you before, Corbin, not to interfere in my department. You have no right or authority to — "

"Authority!" blustered young Corbin. "If that's what you want, my man, Bart Kline gave me that. He even sent his secretary to point out this man for me. And I'll see him about the affair, not you, if you'll please now call off your damned Dago."

Marcel furiously redoubled his efforts to escape the pinioning arms.

"*Parbleu!* it ees too much!" he cried, with an appendix of lurid Montmartre curses. "First it ees 'my man,' and now 'ze damn' Dago!' " And with a quick lunge, he brought his knee up into the pit of Corbin's stomach.

The heir to millions relaxed his hold, and with a bellow of rage and pain swung his big fist back to strike the diminutive Frenchman. But the blow

never fell. A steely grip fastened around the thick wrist and held it fast.

"None of that, Corbin!" Reese snapped. "And you stand back, Marcel, do you hear!"

But young Gordon Corbin was past the point of reason. He was used to having his own way, and Dejeans' blow was painful enough to further arouse his uneven temper to an insane pitch.

"Damn you and your impertinent interference!" he shouted at the shop superintendent. "Let me go, or I'll thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Reese relaxed his hold, his own temper snapping under the abuse. His clenched fists swung ready at his sides.

"Get out of the shop immediately," he said evenly, "or I'll give you a chance to try to do just that!"

But a quieting voice broke in upon the impending mêlée — a well-modulated, condescending voice, yet with a razor edge to it.

"So this is your idea of the proper function of a shop superintendent, is it, Reese?" Barton Kline interposed silkily. "Brawling! Yes, I already have the particulars from Massey," he cut in over Jack's attempted explanation. "And I'm really the one to blame, I'll admit that. I had you slated for discharge along with your — ah — friend, Dejeans. But I thought I was doing you a favor by letting you hang on and quit of your own volition at the end of the week — to give you a better record when you go hunting for another job."

Reese's hands opened and closed spasmodically as he fought for self-control.

"I'll save you the trouble of further 'favors,' then, Kline," he said evenly, at length. "I'll leave tonight."

"Very well," the manager nodded formally. "However, of course you understand that under the circumstances it will have to go down on your company record as a discharge for insubordination and ungentlemanly conduct; and I won't be able to give you the useful recommendation I had hoped to."

Reese smiled grimly.

"Thanks for your generosity, Kline, but I don't intend to apply for a job with Geneva Motors — where I imagine your recommendation might have the most weight," he said hotly, and turned on his heel.

Kline covered his momentary confusion by launching an effusive apology to Corbin over the "distressing incident." But he ridded himself of the dishevelled young rake at the first opportunity and hastened back to his office. There he held a brief interview with his secretary.

"Everything went splendidly — just as we planned it, Sam," he told that unprepossessing individual with marked satisfaction. "And you were right, we didn't get rid of Reese a minute too soon. He smells a mouse, but lacks the proof to back up his hunch. Made a crack, in fact, about me being still connected with Geneva, right in front

of young Corbin. But he's a nitwit, and I passed it off all right, I think. I only regret that I couldn't let Reese give the young snob the licking he needs. But now let's get down to business. I've got to do some quick squaring before it's too late. The old man rather likes Reese, I think."

"You can bring Corbin around, Bart, if anybody can," Massey complimented unctuously. "And these Dejeans papers will help. I worked them over and left out as much about his war record as I dared. And with what happened today, Corbin will never bother to make an investigation on his own hook."

Kline shoved the sheaf of papers back into his secretary's hands with a gesture of impatience.

"There's no use in risking that," he said irritably. "If I work fast and watch my step, I can do a lot of good work here for our people before Corbin catches on. At the worst, Reese won't ever come back here while I'm boss; and I want to have things framed to admit I was misinformed about Dejeans' character if the old man presses me too hard for particulars. He's a nosey old devil, you know.

"But what I have to do right now is to blarney Corbin out of ever passing favorably on Reese's application for a loan to put over that motor of his. He's bound to apply sooner or later, and it would be fatal for us if he got it. He's no boaster, and he knows motors inside out. And I've wormed enough out of him lately to be convinced that he has the

making of a big proposition. He won't sell at any price and he's a hard nut to crack, but we'll tire him out somehow. Our people want that motor, so we'll have to start stepping. Meanwhile, we'll hang on here as long as we can and run old Corbin up against a few stiff snags."

"But won't Corbin get wise when he finds that Geneva has got wind of the improvements on the new six and gone him one better — at the same price?" Massey worried.

Barton Kline chuckled thinly as he started for the door.

"I have that all figured, Sam," he said. "You're the crooked spy I hired in my innocence, and I found you out too late. If Corbin hollers, I'm going to fire you!"

CHAPTER III

THE following morning Reese was early astir. He and Dejeans occupied adjoining bedrooms on the second floor of a cottage on the outskirts of Tres Arroyos; an excellent boarding place, incidentally, along with its special fitness as a spot for experimentation. At the rear, set in a grove of orange trees and overlooked by their bedroom windows, the partners had constructed their workroom. There they were religiously guarded from interruption by "Mother" McGuire, a widowed Irish woman who watched over the comfort of her two "lads" as if they had been her own.

Reese splashed out of the cold shower with a whoop and shoved the cringing Dejeans under the spraying water.

"Wash your sins away, Marcel, and don't forget your neck," he grinned. "Mother McGuire'll give me the dickens again if I don't have you cleaned up for breakfast. She told me last night that she's going to scrub you herself if you don't mend your ways."

"It ees ze lie!" the little Frenchman averred stoutly. "Me, I am so clean lak ze white lil-ee. *Parbleu!* I weel soon have ze scale' lak zose feesh!"

With good natured repartee, the two of them hurried through their breakfast, while portly Mrs. McGuire hovered at hand to forestall their every want.

"You can get things started in the workroom, if you want, Marcel," Jack suggested, as he shoved back his chair with a sigh of repletion. "I'll have to go down to the plant first and clean my personal truck out of the office and draw our pay checks. Then I'm going to the bank to see Mr. Corbin about that loan we'll need before long. He's usually there about eleven, and I want to find out just where I stand with him. He isn't the kind to let that little blow-up I had with his boy prejudice him against me. But it's a sure thing that Kline will run to him with the whole story — and I know him well enough to be sure it won't lose anything in the telling. Mr. Corbin has always been kind to me — mighty kind, and I don't want him to think me ungrateful. Aside from that, though, I'll feel easier when I'm sure that we'll have clear sailing ahead in the matter of finances."

He stood up, with a parting smile for Mrs. McGuire.

"Those were certainly fine hot cakes, Mother — just like Mammy Chloe makes in the advertisements."

"Go 'long wid ye," she flushed delightedly. "'Tis no cooks at all thim niggers are." She paused, fastening an accusing glance on Dejeans, who was surreptitiously edging toward the door. "Marcel! 'tis ashamed o' yerself ye should be — "

"Ze neck, it ees clean," Marcel protested abjectly.

"Come here to me!" she ordered. "'Tis only a

button off yer shirt ye're afther havin', so rest aisy."

Dejeans submitted resignedly; and Jack, smiling broadly, went outside to crank up the cut-down flivver that served him, with only occasional temperamental sulking, as a means of transportation.

Completing his business at the Corbin factory without running across Kline, Reese drove on to the Tres Arroyos Bank. That institution was also controlled by Corbin, but as much for his employees' convenience and protection as for his own interests. By judicious encouragement of thrift and low-interest loans, the old land baron had completely eliminated the salary loan sharks who flourish in most industrial centers to the demoralization of the workman. And he was usually to be found there of a morning, as ready to give his time to the unraveling of the financial ills of the humblest roustabout as to the " big business " that constantly besought his aid.

Jack parked his machine along the bustling thoroughfare outside and passed under the sandstone entrance arch of the bank. As he started for the cashier's desk to ask for Mr. Corbin, however, he was halted from behind by a soft feminine voice calling his name. He swung around, surprised and not a little pleased, to find himself confronted by Joel Corbin's only and worshiped daughter.

Rita Corbin was, perhaps, the greatest remaining justification of her father's tragic marriage. Her

mother, an operatic star of international renown, had died suddenly in the girl's infancy — unhappily estranged from her husband at the time through a vain attempt to conduct a career and a home simultaneously. To the son, Gordon, had gone her erratic, vain disposition and her fiery temper. But Rita had inherited at least a part of the matchless voice — a coloratura soprano — and her mother's piquant beauty, along with Corbin's depth of mind and steadiness, and his democratic viewpoint.

The girl was small and slender, with the willowy grace of a dancer. Her features were delicately molded, but overrun with a bloom of health that required none of the artificial "touching up" of cosmetics. A mass of wavy golden hair was imprisoned rather too primly under a small street hat; but this was counteracted by the gay colors of the sport suit she wore. Her frank gray eyes met Reese's admiring glance with an equally transparent pleasure. There was nothing of the prude or snob to Joel Corbin's daughter.

"Why, Jack Reese, I believe you were purposely trying to avoid me," she accused, with a gay little trill of laughter. "I haven't seen you in weeks and weeks."

"It's been a coon's age, that's a fact, Rita," Jack responded. "But needs must work, you know, when the devil drives — if it's permissible for me to twist up a little of my shaky Shakespeare."

"I like that!" Rita bantered. "I'm going to tell Dad that you called him a driving devil."

"No, no," Reese protested. "I didn't mean him at all. And I'll give up my dramatic education here and now if you insist on analyzing my poetic flights. Seriously, though, I've really been awfully busy."

"Try some more Shakespeare, Jack," Rita smiled. "Even that's better than your excuses. But I've got you cornered now, and you don't escape until you promise to come up to the house to dinner next Wednesday night."

"I'd really like to," Reese said, uncertainly, "but — well, to put it bluntly, I don't think it's advisable. You'll get the particulars sooner or later, so I suppose it will be all right to tell you the reason. Mr. Kline and your brother and I quarreled yesterday — all three of us lost our heads, I guess — and it ended by my leaving the plant for good ——"

"You quit?" Rita asked.

"By mutual consent — as they called it in that Potash and Perlmutter play we saw together," Jack grinned. "I quit, and Barton Kline made it unanimous by firing me."

"I'm sorry. And Gordon was to blame, of course!" the girl guessed, with genuine concern. "He's terribly hot-headed; but he's always ashamed of himself afterward. I'll see that he apologizes if you'll come; and I'll speak my mind to Barton Kline, too ——"

"I'd rather you wouldn't, Rita — really. Kline and I dislike each other enough as it is. And, honestly, I'm too busy right now to accept your invitation, even if that isn't a very tactful excuse. But," he suggested eagerly, "if you're willing, I'd like awfully to drive you out in the hills in my Rolls-Hard the first chance I get. The wild flowers will all be out in a couple of weeks now."

"That's a promise," Rita accepted promptly. "I'll fix up a basket lunch, and we'll make a day of it. And now I suppose I'll have to leave you to your eternal business. You men are all alike." And with a provocative smile of farewell, she was gone.

Jack stared wistfully after her for a moment before going on to request an interview with her father. That last was granted to him quickly enough, and he was ushered into the president's office after only a short wait.

He found the millionaire manufacturer in one of his characteristically informal attitudes. Comfortably relaxed in a swivel chair, teeth clenched over the bit of an old brier pipe, Joel Corbin evidenced none the less the strong personality he was: a man's man, a fighter to the last ditch, but one who knew his strength well enough to be unassuming about it. He was a man of about fifty-five, with penetrating, humorous eyes and the raw-boned, sturdy frame of his Yankee ancestors.

"Well, well, Reese, sit down," he said, kindly. "I'm glad you dropped in to see me. I've heard

about your little tiff yesterday." He silenced Jack's interruption with a wave of the hand. "No, now, wait a minute. Let's get down to brass tacks at the very beginning. First off, I want you to know, Reese, that the fuss you had with Gordon needn't enter into the question at all. He was at fault, and he'll probably apologize to you handsomely after he's had time to cool off. He's young and feels his oats a bit too much sometimes," the father explained indulgently, "but at bottom he's a good-hearted kid.

"Aside from that, Kline admitted that he misunderstood the situation when I pinned him down to facts this morning. And I'm sure you'll find him willing enough to shake hands and call the whole thing quits. So there you are. Your job's waiting for you whenever you're ready to go back."

Jack was at a loss for a moment. He had expected that Corbin would adjudge the question fairly, but this complete vindication rather took his breath away. Nor had he anticipated that Barton Kline would recant without a more stubborn resistance. Again he wondered if he might have misjudged the manager after all.

But this thought had to be quickly pigeon-holed while he readjusted himself to the immediate problem. His old position was open to him. Should he take it or follow out the new and hazardous course he had outlined for himself? Should he and Dejeans return to the security of monthly pay checks or risk everything on the success or

failure of the motor in which they had every confidence? His decision was ready when he replied after only a short consideration of the question.

"That's certainly very kind of you, Mr. Corbin, and I'm more than grateful to you. But"— Jack paused, before plunging on rapidly —"but now that I've finally whipped myself to the unpleasant business of leaving the plant, I think I'll stand by my decision. I didn't come to you in the first place to whine about my discharge. Regardless of the differences I've had with the manager, I would have had to resign in a few months — as much as I enjoyed the work. I've been experimenting with a motor of my own, and it's nearly ready to be manufactured. That's what I came to see you about. I wanted to see if you would finance me in putting out a first demonstration car — a special-body 'job' that will appeal to investors. I need ten thousand dollars."

Joel Corbin settled lower in his chair and took a few rapid puffs at his pipe.

"Kline mentioned something about your motor this morning," he said, "but from the way he spoke I surmised that it was just a sort of hobby with you. Nothing so serious as this. You'd be giving up a good place here with an excellent chance for promotion, you know, for something mighty risky. And there are lots of reliable motors on the market. Are you entirely sure that you've given the whole situation its proper values, Reese?"

"I believe I have," Jack answered, thoughtfully.

"I know there are dozens of first-class motors on the market, too. But, without boasting, I believe I have something quite a bit better."

"But what will you do when you have this demonstration car finished?" Corbin probed keenly. "Naturally, you can't know what it costs to successfully launch a new machine on the market, even granting it's a good one. It would take a small fortune for advertising alone; and the first returns are discouragingly slow in coming in. Moreover, the combined millions of practically the whole automotive business will be fighting you, directly or indirectly. Every man's hand, so to speak, will be turned against you. You and your backers — if you're fortunate enough to get them — will have to go it alone. And mighty tough sledding it will be, you can take my word for that. I know!"

Corbin's face hardened, as if he were reliving in his mind his own early struggles. "First and foremost, you'll have the Geneva Corporation to buck. They're powerful, merciless, and utterly unscrupulous. If you show that you have something good, they'll get it. Starting with an ordinary small capital — a million or two, suppose — I'd say you wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance of escaping them."

Reese winced. The million or two of which Corbin spoke so casually as "ordinary small capital" was considerably in excess of anything he had dreamed of beginning with.

"My car will sell itself to the limited class it

will be designed for — something like the English Rolls-Royce," he expostulated. "It will need very little advertising, and that in exclusive publications with small space rates. I'll sell only a minority of the stock — not to speculators, but to bona-fide investors who aren't looking for Bonanza profits. And I'll be protected from the Geneva Company and the like by the law."

"Right there's where your biggest mistake begins, Reese!" Corbin banged an emphatic fist on his desk-top. "If a company has the money the Geneva has backing its play, it's practically outside the law. That's not radical propaganda, but sound common sense. It's been demonstrated time and again. And Geneva has the corps of clever business perverts to turn the trick. Your stock will be hammered down and raided. False rumors will be spread about your product and your credit. And if all else fails, they'll ring in strong-arm methods on you. If you're weak enough, they'll squash you that way in the beginning."

The millionaire stood up and laid a kindly hand on Jack's shoulder.

"I don't want to discourage you, Reese. Facts like these are hard to swallow, I know, especially for a young fellow like you. But I want you to look at the thing with open eyes. Frankly, you're doomed to fizzle, regardless. Not that I haven't confidence in you. On the contrary. But you'll never be able to bump heads with big money and get away with it. And that's what the automobile

industry is today — big money. The biggest. I'd loan you money for almost anything else, but not for this impossible scheme. I'm sorry, but that's business. And I hope I haven't hurt your feelings by plain speaking."

"You haven't, Mr. Corbin," Jack assured him, reaching for his hat. "And your warning will help me a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Reese replied quietly, "that I'm going to put over the Reese-Dejeans motor — or take a good licking trying to."

The old land baron eyed him speculatively for a moment. Then he held out his hand, with something approaching admiration in his glance.

"Good luck, and put me down for the first car that goes on the market," he chuckled. "And by Godfrey, Reese, if you put it across you won't find old Joel Corbin too proud to take off his hat to a better man!"

CHAPTER IV

On returning home at lunch time, it took no second glance at his dejected person for Dejeans and Mother McGuire to discern that Reese's quest had ended in failure.

"He turned ye down, the tight-fisted ould skinflint!" the Irish woman hazarded. "'Tis a dirty shame, no less. And him wid the money av a Rockafeller."

"Business is business, and he was very kind about it," Jack protested, but without much spirit. "He even offered us our jobs back at the plant. But he couldn't see our motor, Marcel, through a telescope that would show the gondolas on the canals of Mars. Practically told me that it was a hairbrained scheme, even if we had the goods. That in such a case the Geneva Company would sandbag us anyhow, so we might as well save ourselves a lot of wasted effort."

"Sandbaggin', is it!" Mother McGuire proclaimed militantly. "Faith, then, I'll kape a kittle o' bilin' wather on the range, an' the first av 'em that comes snakin' around here'll git a drenchin' they'll remimber all their born days!"

"*Parbleu!* you weel keel some poor man wiz ze watair yet, Madame!" Marcel warned. "Me, it 'as made me so soft lak ze boil' spud. My

friens, zey say, 'Marcel, you look so white and seeck.' And I tell zem, 'It is only zat I am half starve' by zose stingy Madame McGuire.' "

"Saints presarve us, ye're as fat as Paddy's pig, both o' yez!" Madame McGuire flirted her apron complacently at her tormentor. "Now clear out, lads, whilst I stir up a bit lunch. Be off wid yez."

Once outside, Marcel's grin changed to a look of deep concern.

"It ees not zat you are discourage', Jacques my frien'?" he asked uncertainly. "You weel feenish le bon motair, ees it not?"

Reese turned to his diminutive partner with a grim smile.

"In spite of hell and high water, Marcel! I've got to win out. Everything depends on it — everything! It's a desperate gamble, but every fellow has to wade beyond his depth sometime, risk everything for the slim chance of winning the biggest thing that could come into his life ——"

"Mam'zelle Corbin, eh?" Marcel guessed softly. "It ees for her." He shrugged eloquently. "For love, anyzing ees possible. And zose skeeny chance — pouf!— we weel make zem beeg lak la petite Madame McGuire. Sacre damn! me, I mus' ween, too, for her. Zis fight, she ees to ze feenish!"

"To a finish," Reese agreed, smiling at the little Frenchman's admission of aspiration toward the hand of portly Mrs. McGuire. "And here's hoping, Marcel, that Cupid takes a correspondence course in archery before you put him on the job.

He's been a poor shot, I'm afraid, in my particular case."

"Maybe it ees zat Madame McGuire ees ze beeger target," Marcel confided irrepressibly. "In ze moveeng peekshair — oh, la, la!— we have already hol' ze hand!"

In the afternoon the partners began in earnest the final experiments that would, when completed, mean the perfection of the Reese-Dejeans motor. Marcel had the workshop in readiness, and this was completely enough equipped for their purposes. It contained a good-sized motor lathe, a small forge, and an oxy-acetylene furnace; and under one window in a good light was Jack's drawing board. The designing fell to him for his share — with frequent advice from Dejeans; while the little Apache exercised all his skill and ingenuity in adapting these specifications, practically, to the motor that was slowly assembling in the center of the workroom.

Actually, the partners were engaged in a race with time. Since Joel Corbin had refused them a loan, they could discover only one slender thread on which to pin the hope of gaining the money imperative to safeguard their discoveries through patenting and to manufacture a first demonstration car. The California racing season was drawing near. And it was to be ushered in at the new Capri Track, just south of San Francisco, with the annual classic known internationally as the Girard Cup Race.

A slight enough hope this could hold out to the partners at best. The finest cars in the world would be entered as a matter of course — Peugots, Sunbeams, Mercedes, the cream of all Continental and American makes, along with the usual host of dark-horse "specials." The most daring drivers, men of experience and superlative track craft, would pilot these flying, thundering annihilators of time and space.

To the manufacturers of established standing, only the winning of a favorable place at the finish mattered. To the partners, this was incidental to the ten-thousand-dollar cash award going to the driver first hurtling past the checkered flag into the last lap and victory. A win, the ten thousand dollars which would supply their pressing need for capital — that was the chimera upon which they came to set their hearts and re-foundation their hopes!

It had been Marcel's idea in the beginning, and Jack had scoffed at it at first. But the Frenchman's insistence and confidence finally brought Reese round to a more favorable attitude. If the Reese-Dejeans motor held the sturdy heart they were trying to build into it, if it could be finished in time, there was no reason apparent why it could not stand up under a speed of better than a hundred miles an hour. And Jack had confidence that he could hold the car "to the ground" at whatever pace it was capable of making!

Such was the ambitious project which the part-

ners outlined for themselves during the first week of work. The Reese-Dejeans Special, if completed in time, would compete in the inaugural event at the Capri Speedway for the Girard Cup and ten thousand dollars in gold. Reese would pilot the racer; Marcel was to ride as mechanician. A thousand dollars was apportioned from Jack's dwindling bank account to buy a strong second-hand chassis in which to seat the motor, and other necessary equipment. And the partners, finally in accord on the scheme, plunged with renewed energy into the work of completing the motor.

The first of the next week Jack heard of a machine in a Los Angeles automobile "boneyard" that would exactly fill their needs, and he took a day off to go south and look it over. He found it in no wise impressive in appearance, but his mechanic's eye quickly discerned numerous latent possibilities in the "heap." It was, in fact, an antedated racing car which had fallen into sorry disrepair when eighty miles an hour ceased to be a speed to conjure with. The rubber was threadbare, the motor coughed asthmatically, and the "slap-on" coat of paint it had received, like an old maiden lady's rouge, only served to accentuate its glaring deficiencies. But the frame and transmission, to which Reese gave particular attention, were as sound as new. And after throwing up his hands a half-dozen times at Jack's merciless dickering, the owner finally called him back to close the deal for three hundred dollars.

"You drive a hard bargain, young fellow," he said, "but I need the mazum'. Three hundred takes it. But hold the brute down," he advised. "She goes like a bullet."

Jack grinned as he handed over the purchase price.

"If those two good lungs chug me home by midnight," he laughed, "I'll send you a card of thanks. And the first junkman who wants to 'go like a bullet' can have the motor free, gratis and for nothing."

"What the devil you want it for then if you know so damn' much?" the other queried belligerently, while the fistful of crisp bills went plunging into a pants' pocket.

Jack stepped on the accelerator and started the old racer jerking and bucking down the drive.

"Oh," he responded over his shoulder, "I'm thinking of making a roller coaster out of it. I live on a steep hill!" And with that he was on his way back to Tres Arroyos.

Notwithstanding sundry stops to repair blowouts, and one to adjust a shorted wire, Reese arrived home on scheduled time. Backfiring like a platoon of machine guns, the "bargain" hiccoughed its way into Mother McGuire's back yard shortly after midnight. Jack, grease-smeared and weary, but triumphant, clambered stiffly from the cockpit in time to assure the anxious Irishwoman that the Japanese were not attempting to invade California via the Tres Arroyos harbor. And she

modestly retired her white-robed form within her bedroom window with the thoughtful mention that, as no enemy threatened, Jack might use the " biling wather " on the kitchen range for tea making.

The next two days Reese employed in fruitless wrestling with the elusive problem of developing the new frictionless type of bearing he wished to incorporate in the motor. It was the last major difficulty to overcome, but a solution of it had evaded him for weeks. However, the principle on which he was working was sound, he was convinced. And with frictionless bearings installed — with a consequent elimination of all possibility of burned-out bushings — the Reese-Dejeans could hardly fail to mark a new departure in motor safety and efficiency.

In the late afternoon of the second day, Jack gave up as hopeless the experiment he had been working on since morning. It had looked promising enough when the idea came to him, but, like many inspirations, it gave up the ghost when laid out on paper. Hours of wasted effort and tiring concentration were a part of the crumpled draughting sheet that Jack brushed wearily into a waste-basket.

" Where are those bearing drawings and alloy formulas I was working on yesterday, Marcel?" he asked. " I guess I'll have to go back and pick up that tack again. This last brilliant idea of mine is deader than a dodo."

Dejeans turned a perspiring face from the forge.

"Ze drawings? I have not seen zem."

"You must have," Jack said. "They aren't here. And I'm positive I left them partly tucked in under my board. Maybe you misplaced them when you cleaned up last night."

"Me, I have not seen zem; I have not touch' zem," Marcel insisted. "And ze desk I have nevair clean' at night. Theenk! Zis morning, were zey here when you opened up?"

"There's where you're cornered at last," Reese accused. "You opened up. I remember distinctly picking up the padlock where you dropped it on the ground after unlocking the shebang before breakfast. You're lovesick, Marcel," he laughed, "that's what's the matter with you. But lend me a hand now and we'll see where you hid them."

Marcel, however, with his hands half raised to high heaven as witness to his innocence, suddenly darted across the room and dropped to his knees beside a loose board in the flooring. With a sigh of relief he found and replaced the box containing the finished part of the motor plans in its snug hiding place beneath the planking.

"Sacre damn!" he ejaculated. "Me, I have zose fright of ze life!"

Reese looked on in complete bewilderment.

"What's the idea, Marcel?" he asked. "Did you think you'd put them in the box by mistake?"

Marcel gestured tragically.

"Zose papairs, you weel nevair see zem again, Jacques," he prophesied. "Zey are gone. Las'

night, zose door it was shut wiz ze padlock. Madame McGuire weel tell you zat; she was wiz me when I snapped it shut. Zis morning it ees open. Me, I theenk, too, it ees you who has been here first. But, no! it ees not so. It ees that some one has been here in ze night ——"

"You mean," Jack demanded incredulously, "that some one broke in during the night and stole whatever of our drawings he could lay his hands on?"

Marcel nodded mutely.

"Impossible!" Reese scoffed. "Both our windows overlook the shop, and we'd have certainly heard any such noise as it would take to break open that lock. Besides, it isn't even marred."

Dejeans silently took the open padlock in his hand and snapped it shut. Then, bunching his handkerchief behind the hinge, he dealt the lock a sharp blow with a pair of pliers. The sound was hardly audible, but the padlock clicked open in his palm.

"You win, Marcel," Reese admitted grimly. "But thank the Lord they didn't get anything worth while for their trouble. Those plans were practically worthless as they stood. But we've had a close squeak, and it'll be a good lesson to us. It was no common sneak thief, that's evident, for there's nothing else missing. But he'll try again, if he's the sort we suspect. So I'll rent a safe deposit box at the bank for the finished plans the first time I go down town; and we can take

turns sleeping in here to guard the motor. I think we can handle any rough stuff the Geneva outfit tries — if Mr. Corbin was right about them — without anything more than my old Colt to back us up, don't you, Marcel?"

The little Apache's dark eyes glinted malevolently.

"Ze steel — ze knife!" he exclaimed. "Zere ees nozzing lak' it in ze fight. It ees queeck; it ees sure. Pouf! it ees done. Me, I need only ze knife."

Reese shuddered, then smiled.

"One look at you brandishing a toadstabber would be enough to frighten any one to death, Marcel!" he laughed. "But now let's get back to work ——"

But Marcel had hurried off to the house. He returned shortly, bearing a small, oblong package. Without vouchsafing any explanation, he undid the wrapping.

Muscles creeping in spite of himself, Jack bent down over his board. The package, he had seen, contained a short, thick-bladed and double-edged stiletto — the gruesome Apache cutting dagger. For a few minutes he heard the steady purr of whetting steel. After a time it stopped. A gentle sigh of satisfaction came to Jack's ears.

And whistling a gay Montmartre melody, Marcel Dejeans serenely took up where he had left it his interrupted work at the forge.

CHAPTER V

UNTIL late into the night the partners continued their labors. And when Jack was finally ready to call it a day, it was with the sinking realization that the Girard race was another twenty-four hours nearer — without any compensating advance toward the completing of the motor. Not that the painstaking experiments just discarded as useless were entirely without value. For each of them, impracticable though it had proved, narrowed down the field wherein success might be found. And Jack was gradually being won over to the conviction that the problem of the non-friction bearing would be solved through some new process of molding rather than any particular change in the elements of the alloy material.

Marcel took the first night's turn at guard duty, sleeping in the workroom on the cot Mother McGuire had made up for him there. But no prowler disturbed his heavy slumbers; and the grim "steel" under the pillow was replaced by Jack's blunt-nosed Colt when the bed was remade in the morning. Nor did either of the partners anticipate when the exchange was made that both of their chosen weapons would be called into play before the quiet day was out.

At shortly after noon, working feverishly, Reese suddenly sprang from his stool with a cry of elation.

"By Jupiter! I've got it at last, I think, Marcel!" he shouted. "Simple as falling off a log, too. Look here."

Dejeans listened to the technical explanation with rapt attention.

"Sacre damn! it ees at last discovair'!" he applauded. "It ees ze beeg head you have, Jacques — beeg, beeg!"

"I hope not," Reese smiled. "And let's not count our chickens before they're hatched. We'd better see what comes out of the mold first."

But the practical testing of the discovery pointed to its complete success. Instead of melting the metal and molding the molten fluid in the usual way, Jack's idea was to powder the alloy first, put it into the mold in that form, and subject it to heat. And the theory proved its worth on Marcel's first skillful test. When taken out of the furnace, the new Reese-Dejeans bearing showed a certain desirable porosity not present in bearings moulded in the standard manner; it was capable of absorbing a portion of its weight in lubricants. Moreover, Jack's alloy had a lower melting point than steel and therefore became an integral part of the material.

The little Apache was in a seventh heaven of delight.

"*Voila!* it ees succeed'!" he exulted. "Ze freektionless bearing, she weel make *le bon* motair ir-r-resistible. She ees fool-proof; she weel nevair get 'ot. *Parbleu!* it ees bettair zan ze Peu-

got. Jacques — my frien' Jacques!" he shrilled, embracing his partner ecstatically, "Zose race — pouf! — it ees won. I have ze beeg hunch!"

Reese, wheeling to escape Marcel's arms, stood stock still of a sudden. Over the diminutive Frenchman's shoulder, he got a full view of the open doorway — and what stood framed within it. Ferret eyes alight with curiosity and eagerly exploring the room, shoulders rounded down even more than usual because of the low entrance and his excessive height, Sam Massey stood on the doorstep taking in the scene!

"Hello, everybody!" he called out, with a hollow effort at ease and heartiness. "I just was passing and thought I'd drop in on you for a second. How's every little thing, anyhow, Reese?"

"Well enough, Massey," Jack assured him coldly. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Just came up the second you spotted me." Kline's secretary began edging his way inside, tentatively. "Quite a complete layout you have here. How's the motor coming — ?"

Jack blocked the way of further advance.

"You're not welcome in here, Massey," he said flatly. "My friends know better than to bother me when I'm working, and to put it plainly, I don't count you among them. At the plant you went out of your way to be disagreeable whenever possible. So why glad-hand me now?"

"That was business," Massey excused himself.

"That is to say, I was working for Kline, and I had to ride you or lose my job."

"You're not his secretary any more, then?" Reese queried.

Massey shook his head angrily.

"He fired me yesterday, the big stiff! Told old man Corbin I sold out the secret of the improvements on the new six to the Geneva Company." His small eyes narrowed resentfully. "But I'll square accounts with him, don't worry. Bart Kline or any other man can't give me the bum's rush without paying for it!"

Reese studied the man intently. To all appearances Massey was entirely in earnest. His manner was convincing. Yet there was something about his story, an intangible false note, that did not ring quite true. And it was obvious that Massey was lying about his casual visit. Mother McGuire's cottage was isolated on the outskirts of Tres Arroyos — several blocks from any other and the last on its street. And Kline's ex-secretary would hardly have walked the mile or more from the car line simply to renew an altogether dubious friendship.

Jack determined to draw him out if possible.

"Well, it's too bad you lost your job," he said, more cordially. "But I suppose an experienced office man like you can always get another place easily enough."

"I've got one ready and waiting any time I want to go back," Massey informed him. "I

came west with Kline, thinking he'd treat me white and take care of me with something soft. Instead, he treated me like a dog and made me do all his dirty work. I'm loyal — too damned loyal, that's my big trouble — or I'd have quit him cold three months ago. But the Geneva people want me back, and I'm going — after I put a few twists in Kline's tail he won't forget in a hurry, believe me!"

"I see. Going to get even, eh?" Jack murmured. "Can't say I blame you, either, under the circumstances."

"I should think you wouldn't," Massey exploded. "After the raw deal he handed you! That was a frame-up — him getting rid of you. And he runs you down every chance he gets. I've heard him pan you to old Corbin a dozen times. Downright lies, every one of them, too."

"The contemptible cur!" Jack burst out, winking furtively at Marcel.

Massey lowered his voice persuasively.

"Now look here, Reese. We're in the same boat, it looks to me. Why not pull together, then, and give Kline the big bump that's coming to him?" Convincingly he went in detail over their mutual grievances.

"But what could we do?" Jack shrugged. "Kline has the confidence of Mr. Corbin, so I don't see where we could reach him."

"Easy!" Massey exclaimed. "I happen to know that Kline's been buying Corbin stock short

lately, figuring it's hit low on this slump. We could pick him clean if we engineer it right. If Corbin Motors went down another ten points, Kline wouldn't own the coat on his back. And you're the man that could work it, by God! The whole shop would quit in a minute if you talked up a strike right."

"But that might injure Mr. Corbin, too," Jack demurred.

"What of it?" Massey countered. "He's got money to burn. And I tell you, Reese, if you help me pull this stunt, I can put you in touch with people who would back this motor of yours only too quick — "

"People?"

"Well, Geneva Motors, then. I've got an inside pull there yet, even if I did quit them. And if I said your motor was the goods, they'd take my word for it."

"I do need money, but my motor isn't for sale," Reese told him.

"Well, then," Massey quickly dropped that point, "we'll forget that angle of it. You need money. All right! You frame the strike, and I'll make it worth your while. Aside from putting Kline in a bad hole. What do you say? Are you with me?"

Jack's contempt for the Geneva spy, restrained with difficulty until now, came boiling to the surface.

"Get out, Massey!" he snapped. "Get out, or

I'll forget what a miserable little pup you are and knock you down!"

"Now, listen here —" Massey protested. But the sentence was cut short as Reese spun the cringing figure about facing the door and gave it outbound momentum with a well-placed kick.

Massey picked himself up from the ground beyond the doorstep, his narrow face livid with rage.

"I'll get you for that, Reese, and get you right!" he promised, backing away. "Your damned motor won't be worth a plugged cent to you when I'm finished with you —"

Marcel appeared in the door, tenderly thumbing the edge of his stiletto.

"Peeg! shake ze leg!" he commanded, raising the knife to a throwing position. And Sam Massey, with a final minatory flourish of his bony fist, fled incontinently.

"Well, the cat's out of the bag at last, Marcel," Jack smiled grimly. "It seems that Mr. Corbin was right in our case, even if he didn't see in time that he was in the same boat. Geneva Motors is gunning for both our hides. And," he added, musingly, "I've got more of a notion than ever, somehow, that our friend Barton Kline is playing a two-handed game."

Shortly before dinner time, the partners knocked off work, well pleased with the day's developments. Marcel performed his evening ablutions with unusual care.

"Me, it ees zat I take Madame McGuire to ze

moveeng peekshair," he apologized to Reese. "Maybe you loan me ze flivvair again, eh, Jacques?"

"Help yourself," Jack offered. "Here's the key. Only don't go joy-riding afterward. I'll be waiting up for you, remember."

"No, no," Marcel blushed. "Wiz ze joy ride zere ees nozzing doing. I have ask' already. But, no; Madame ees mos' particular."

When the cut-down finally labored away bearing the demure Mrs. McGuire and her diminutive escort, Jack went immediately to the workroom. He switched on the light above his drawing board, and dragged the cot over close to it. Then, making sure that all the more important drawings were safely stowed in their hiding place beneath the floor, he lay down to read for an hour or so before going to bed. The work of the past week had been carried on under severe tension, and he felt the need of relaxation.

But the magazine pages lost their savor after a time. His thoughts kept wandering off into other channels, and he tossed the magazine aside in disgust after he had lost the thread of the narrative repeatedly. He was lonesome, he realized acutely. He wanted companionship. Marcel and Mrs. McGuire had the best hearts in the world, but they didn't understand some things — well, as a girl like Rita Corbin would understand them, for instance.

With a guilty start, Jack recalled his promise to Rita to take her out into the hills for a day. He

wondered if she had forgotten as he had, if she had overlooked it in the press of invitations that came to her daily. He thought not. Rita wasn't the kind to forget. Her friends meant more to her than to most girls similarly placed. He decided to call her up in the morning and arrange a definite date for the outing. With the new bearing perfected, there was at last time to spare for a breathing spell before plunging on into the easier work of constructing the Reese-Dejeans Special for the Girard Cup Race.

Jack smiled to himself. Excuses came easy where a girl was concerned; and he knew that he particularly wanted to tell Rita about his success with the motor and the ambitious plans he had built upon it. Of course, he told himself, he would make no mention of the intimate part she played in his complete scheme of things. That dream — and he winced as he thought of it — would probably never come true. Rita would doubtless be married to Barton Kline or some other man of assured social and financial standing long before the Reese-Dejeans found an established place in the automobile industry.

Jack's musings were abruptly cut short by a knock on the door. Startled, he reached his hand under the pillow to assure himself that the Colt was there. He had heard no one approach; and, too, he was alone.

"Who is it?" he asked.

A soft feminine voice answered.

"I'm having trouble with my car. It's broken down just at the end of your drive, and I can't seem to find what's the matter. I knocked at the front door, but no one answered. So, as a last resort, I came out here. I saw the light." The appealing voice was near to tears. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me use your telephone and call up a garage. I — I'm alone."

Jack threw open the door. He found himself looking down into a doll-like face, whose dark eyes — rather splendid eyes, at that — were tear misted and lined with fatigue.

"I'm sorry I had to keep you waiting," he apologized, "but I assure you that it wasn't simply to be boorish. Is that your car out there — the Corbin sedan?"

The girl nodded.

"Yes. I was delayed in Santa Barbara or I never would have been caught after dark in this out-of-the-way spot — if you'll pardon me."

"Certainly," Jack smiled. He saw that the girl's predicament was genuine, and he rather welcomed than otherwise the diversion of her coming. "And possibly," he continued, "it won't be necessary to send into town for a mechanic. I know enough about a Corbin to make any slight repairs. I'll take a look anyhow if you wish."

The girl accepted gratefully. Jack tossed a wrench down beside the door to keep it open, and accompanied her down the drive. He was taking no risk that he could perceive. The sedan stood

immediately in line with the drive, and from it he could at all times command a view of the lighted shop doorway. And in his hip pocket was the automatic.

The "engine trouble" took only a moment to locate, moreover. One turn of the starter, and Jack stepped to the ground, laughing.

"It's nothing serious, then?" the girl asked anxiously.

"It might be on any car but the Corbin," Reese replied. "It happens that you're out of gas!" He turned the nickeled lever opening the small emergency tank, a Corbin feature, and held open the door. "That fixes it, I think. But you'd better stop at the next service station you pass."

After effusive thanks, the lone motorist drove off. And Jack returned to the shop with a decision to turn in. But he had no more than removed his coat, when his attention was drawn to a crackling sound coming from outside the rear wall. He threw up the window shade and looked out. The sheathing of redwood shingles, bone dry, was ablaze to the rafters!

Reese saw at a glance that while he could not hope to cope with the mounting flames alone, there was no danger of the fire spreading to the cottage. But there was no time to spare for sending in an alarm if he wished to save anything. As rapidly as he could, therefore, he picked out the more valuable tools and carried them to safety. It was an easy matter to lever the motor out over

the doorstep. Then, while there was still time, he re-entered the doomed workshop to remove the plans from beneath the flooring. With these safe under his arm, he darted out the door.

But a gruff command stopped him as he crossed the threshold. He whirled around, his free hand reaching instinctively for the automatic in his pocket. The movement, however, stopped midway. Confronting Reese was a masked man, with a heavy-caliber revolver resting ready in his hand!

"Up with those mitts!" the hoarse voice — patently disguised — repeated the command. "And hand over that box!"

CHAPTER VI

JACK executed the thug's order with alacrity — at least in part. He knew enough of firearms to entirely respect their capabilities. But he did not at once give over the box of plans.

"Have it your own way, old man," he grinned, extending his arms above him. "But you won't find enough on me to pay you for your time. There's less than a dollar in my pocket."

The other made no reply. He quickly "frisked" Reese, abstracting only the Colt automatic, however, which he dropped into his coat pocket.

"Now gimme that box!" he barked.

"But it's nothing but some — some personal papers," Jack demurred. "It could be of no possible value to you."

"Hand it over!" The thug pressed the muzzle of his weapon tight against Reese's stomach. "It happens to be worth a whole lot to me."

A light dawned on Jack. Not without admiration of a sort, he saw how he had been cleverly trapped into this desperate predicament. The thug had patiently awaited a favorable opportunity; he had then fired the shop, knowing well that the plans would quickly come to light in the emergency. Inwardly cursing himself for not having taken the time to put the drawings in a safe deposit box, as he had intended, Reese extended the thin packet to his captor.

"Here it is," he shrugged. "Turn it over to the Geneva gang with my compliments."

The thief eagerly grasped the package. But as he did so, momentarily relaxed from his catlike vigilance, Jack lunged at him. His fingers bit into the thug's wrist just above the revolver, instantly throwing it out of its dangerous alignment. A sudden sharp wrench, aided by the leverage of his right forearm — an Apache trick Reese blessed Marcel for having shown him — and the thug, with a cry of pain, dropped the weapon to the ground. But before his pain-numbed fingers could fasten on the butt of the automatic, Reese had the thug locked in a tight clinch.

Back and forth they swayed, each striving vainly for an advantage. Reese was the shorter of the two, but more muscular. But this was offset by the thug's wiry and supple elusiveness. Time and again he all but squirmed free, only to have his hand caught in the nick of time before it could reach the automatic.

Both fought silently, grimly aware of the necessity of husbanding their strength. The struggle would be to a finish, that was evident. The thug had his liberty at stake; Jack's future was wrapped up in the thin packet of plans now being trodden underfoot. And with the lurid flare from the workshop — aflame beyond all hope of salvage now — lighting up the scene of conflict, the combatants fought it out.

For a time Reese had slightly the better of it.

With a lightning-quick left he forced the thug to keep his arms continually on guard, and he rocked the man time and again with slashing uppercuts. Repeatedly he measured his opponent with well-timed blows to the jaw and body; and by deft blocking, he managed to evade for the most part the other's powerful but awkward swings.

But the thug seemed made of steel. His power to assimilate punishment was unbelievable. And his clubbed fists, flailing out wildly, began to find a solid mark with increasing frequency.

But Jack dared not give an inch, even when a foul blow sent a wave of nausea and weakness sweeping over him from head to toe. At all costs, he knew that he must keep the offensive, must crowd his man so closely that the other would have no moment to flash the automatic from his coat pocket.

Clinching with weakened strength, Jack tripped his opponent to the ground. Over and over they rolled — first one on top, then the other. But the masked man knew more of the tricks of this rough and tumble fighting. Effectually smothering Reese's short-arm jabs, he yet found repeated opportunity to use his own elbows and knees with telling effect. And without at all relaxing his defense, he worked his hands slowly toward Jack's neck.

And at last the powerful, bony fingers found their goal. Reese felt them bite into his throat and shut off his labored breath. But anchored

flat on his back, with his senses reeling, he yet clung stubbornly to the thug's free arm — which was again groping for the pistol. With his other hand, Jack clawed weakly at the black mask close above him. And finally he managed to pull it free. Distorted with hatred and fear were the features thus exposed — the ferret face of Sam Massey!

Suddenly Reese went limp. His head lolled back and his arms dropped inert to his sides. Massey shifted his position slightly to get at his weapon. But as he grasped its butt, Jack's two hands shot out and closed over the bony wrist again; and Jack's legs, freed for the moment, locked quickly about the Geneva spy's lower ribs.

Despairingly, his face washed of color from the effort, Reese drew tighter his rib-crushing scissors hold. His locked ankles straightened away from the other's back in a final attempt to make the pressure unendurable.

For a long moment, victory hung in the balance. Massey moaned with pain, writhed convulsively. But his right hand, free at last, came from his pocket holding the automatic. Pointing it fairly at Reese's head, he pressed the trigger!

Unfortunately for him, Massey was not familiar with the mechanism of an automatic pistol. He did not know that his finger all but touched the safety lock which would free the trigger which he pressed frantically — and without result. He reversed the weapon, groaning, and brought it swing-

ing down in a weak, glancing blow against Jack's temple.

Massey extricated himself from the unconscious form beneath him and stumbled to his feet. He took a staggering step toward his revolver, glinting near by in the flame-lit yard. Reese had recognized him; a shot would end the possibility of a long imprisonment. But he suddenly stopped. Then, with an incoherent cry of fear, he scooped up the packet of motor plans and dashed into the protecting shadows of the fruit trees behind the shop. And not a second too soon. A machine was skidding on two wheels into the driveway. Marcel and Mother McGuire were concluding their evening's trip to the movies with a record-breaking sprint!

While the Irishwoman telephoned hysterically for the police and fire departments, Dejeans brought his partner around with a dash of cold water. And in short order Jack was back on his feet, tenderly massaging his bruised scalp while recounting the story of the disaster.

"Sacre damn!" Marcel excitedly cut him short near the beginning, "it ees ze beeg Corbin close' car you feex?"

"Yes, it was —"

But Marcel was already frantically spinning the crank on the cut-down. His eyes were bright with a new hope.

"Come!" he cried. "Zose Corbin sedan, it ees now parked in ze next block. Me, I 'ave seen it as

we came by. Ze girl, she ees ze decoy zat waits for Massey!"

Reese picked up the Geneva spy's deserted revolver and climbed shakily into the seat beside Marcel. And the flivver, vibrating a protest in every joint at the mistreatment, spun in a semicircle and went careening out of the drive.

Dejeans switched on the spotlight and up-tilted it to shine far down the street. Two blocks ahead, just getting well under way, it picked up the machine Jack had "repaired" so trustfully for the girl from Santa Barbara. Evidently Massey had lost several valuable minutes through exhaustion or overcautiousness in circling widely to rejoin his fair accomplice.

But the girl, for all the frailty she had exhibited to Jack, soon enough proved herself an excellent driver. The sedan rapidly picked up a speed of sixty miles an hour, and took a sharp turn to the right no less skillfully than did the cut-down under Marcel's guidance. Probably supposing that a warning had been sent ahead to Tres Arroyos, the girl chose to flee toward the foothills. And it seemed likely that she would shortly show a clean pair of heels to the pursuers. Marcel, extracting the last ounce of power from the lighter motor, was gradually being outdistanced.

"Ze gun! Shoot!" he shouted to Reese, without moving his straining eyes from the road ahead. "Shoot! or zey weel get away."

Jack shook his head.

"I might hit the girl."

"Zen aim for ze tires."

"And kill her in a big smash-up? No," Jack said decisively. "She's a woman. I couldn't do that — even to get the plans back. We'll have to race it out." He chuckled in spite of himself. "They've only got a couple of gallons of gas left, I'll swear that, Marcel. They didn't figure on a slip-up like this. And if they keep heading east, we'll have 'em in less than a half hour. After they cross the highway, it's uphill work for a good ten miles, with no turnoffs. And you know how the Corbin eats the gas on a climb!"

On sped the sedan. The flivver followed. A good half mile separated the two when the highway was reached. But without faltering, the leading machine shot across the gray asphalt and on into the hills.

Marcel laughed exultantly.

In five minutes more, the sedan had widened the gap to a mile. The hills were closing in. Often the leading car was lost sight of on the winding road; but the reflection from its powerful headlights could be seen far across the opposing cañon walls. Soon even this tracer was lost.

"They're out of gas at last," Jack guessed. "They've stopped and snapped off the lights. And Massey won't get far in this brush with the girl on his hands. I think we'll get those plans back tonight yet, Marcel."

The little Frenchman drove on in silence for a

space. The flivver racked along at a veritable snail's pace, steam hissing out around the radiator cap. Abruptly Marcel threw on the brake and stopped.

"It ees far enough, I theenk," he said, clambering out. "We are close. And zey may be waiting to shoot." He cast a disgusted glance at the simmering cut-down. "Sacre damn! it ees anyhow bettair to walk!"

Cautiously the partners advanced. Jack held Massey's revolver ready in his hand. From somewhere about his person, Marcel abstracted his beloved "steel."

One bend followed another. The moonless night was almost impenetrably dark. To proceed silently required slow and careful walking. But around the fifth bend the sedan was finally discovered. Closed in upon cautiously, it was found to be deserted.

Marcel circled the machine and then returned to Jack.

"Zey cannot 'ave gone far," he whispered. "Lie down flat on ze ground and wait. We weel see."

Wonderingly, Reese obeyed, following his partner's maneuvers in bewilderment. The little Apache first found himself a stick. With this he went noiselessly back to the sedan. He opened the door, and, keeping well down, punched on the tonneau light. Then lying flat on his back in the darkness beneath the running board, he slowly

raised his cap on the stick until it bobbed just level with the plate-glass windows.

From well up on the hillside a shot rang out. Came the splintering sound of broken glass. With a dry chuckle of amusement, Marcel lowered his cap — neatly perforated through the crown!

"Sacre damn!" he exclaimed admiringly, yet ruefully. "Zose cap, she cost me two dollair! Massey ees ze good shot."

"I'm convinced!" Jack agreed. "And I'm beginning to suspect, too, that Sam Massey is a better scrapper than I ever gave him credit for. He surely puts up a great battle when he's cornered, anyhow."

"Pouf!" Marcel disparaged. "Even ze rat weel fight in ze peench. But come. We weel follow. You shall see zat ze steel ees bettair. *Voila!* me, am I to lose ze whole night's sleep?"

Jack followed close behind up the oak-grown hillside whence the shot had come. The Apache seemed gifted with the trail instinct of an Indian. He followed an unerring course, while Jack, completely at sea in the tangle of shrubbery, kept up with difficulty. But finally Marcel stopped.

"From zere, among zose oaks, ze shot it ees come." He pointed upward toward a spot to which Reese's eyes could not fathom. "It ees come from zere, but zey are gone." Implacably, he resumed the pursuit. "Come."

Jack, however, remained rooted to the spot.

"Marcel!" he cried. "Listen!"

From below on the roadway came the soft purr of a motor getting under way. The sound of a hastily meshed gear assured Reese that he was not mistaken in his quick suspicion.

"They circled down around us while we were climbing!" he ejaculated disgustedly. "If we aren't the pair of blue-ribbon fools, Marcel!"

Crashing downward through the brush, the partners reached the road in time to catch the mocking wink of a tail light disappearing around a bend far below. The sedan was gone. And more, the flivver had been pilfered of part of its fuel supply, and the pet cock had been left open to drain the rest.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" Jack blinked. "But I'll have to hand it to Massey; that was neat work."

"Name of a name!" Marcel mourned. "Ees it zen zat I am to walk home on ze foot?"

"Not unless Massey hunted out our private stock, too." Jack threw open the luggage compartment behind the seat. "I've been caught empty too many times not to be ready for an emergency. This gallon ought to take us back to town."

With the spare container emptied into the tank, the partners started on their return trip.

"If I'd only thought to take the registration number," Jack grieved. "That might have helped some."

"Me, I saw zose numbair," Marcel informed him, brightening. "I remembair. It ees zis year's numbair."

"Of course it is," Reese replied impatiently. "Just like almost a million others. What good is that?"

"Zis year's numbair!" Dejeans insisted. "One-nine-two-t'ree!"

"Eleven hundred pardons, Monsieur!" Jack grinned. "I didn't understand at first. But now that I know the number, we'll hustle down to police headquarters and have them broadcast a warning. It probably won't do any good, but it's worth the chance."

Shortly before midnight, the partners reached the Tres Arroyos police station and made a report of the events of the evening. The desk sergeant jotted down the sedan's number without extending much hope.

"Massey stole the car most likely," he theorized, "and he and the skirt'll ditch it for some safer getaway. But I'll send out word. We haven't a record of this year's registrations here yet, but if you want to wait a minute I'll phone the Los Angeles police headquarters and get the dope."

The connection was made quickly, and after a brief conversation the sergeant hung up the receiver.

"Yes. I was right; the bus was stolen," he said, swinging around in his chair. "Lifted right in this town, in fact."

"In Tres Arroyos?" Jack queried.

"Yes. It belongs to the manager of the Corbin plant — Barton Kline."

CHAPTER VII

At approximately eleven o'clock that night, Barton Kline returned home by taxi from an informal affair at the Corbin mansion. His home was a rather pretentious establishment for a bachelor to manage, but Kline had both the income and the inclination to indulge his lavish tastes. He lived there alone, save for the three servants who waited upon him — a butler brought from the East, a Chinese cook, and a negro chauffeur whom he had given the night off. A woman came in daily to care for the house.

Kline let himself in with his latchkey and went immediately to the library, which he seemed surprised and no little nonplussed to find unoccupied. He rang impatiently for the butler, who responded immediately, entering through a door which gave into a rear hallway.

"Hasn't Massey got back yet, Stevens?" Kline asked sharply.

The butler, stout, florid, and in no wise typical of his calling, answered with a similarly striking lack of deference.

"No, he ain't," he said. "He came and got the car about nine, but he ain't showed up or reported since. Something must of slipped up."

"Umph! I doubt it." Kline dropped into a chair. "Massey's a fool, Stevens. We'll have to

get rid of him before long. He loses his head too easy. But he's a good man for this job, and he's always teamed up well with Dolly before. She steadies him. And if things had gone very far wrong, she'd have gotten word to us somehow before now."

"Maybe they double-crossed you," Stevens suggested pessimistically.

The Corbin manager shook his head emphatically.

"Not a chance. Dolly and I understand each other pretty well," he said, with a meaning smile, "and Sam isn't taking any chances with me. I know too much about his history." He lit a cigar and settled back complacently. "No, this scheme you figured out is water-tight as far as we're concerned, Stevens. We're in the clear any way you look at it, or I'd never have gone into it. If Massey gets the plans, I'll see to it that you and I get most of the credit. But if he and Dolly should be caught, there'll be no comeback from them. I'll have you report the car stolen in about a half hour, anyhow, just for safety's sake — that is, unless they show up all to the clear in the meantime. And if things turn out right later, we can always notify the police to drop the case."

For nearly a half hour thereafter, wrapped in thought, Kline sat silently before the library fireplace, chewing nervously at the dead perfecto pinched between his teeth. Occasionally he smiled, half mockingly, but for the most part his

thick brows were drawn together in a frown of concentration. And once his right arm stretched out, the thick fingers crushing slowly together, while his blinking hazel eyes were alight with a sinister sort of triumph.

That was Barton Kline's way of climbing toward the goal of power which was his ruling passion. He crushed. On his way to success he had ruined a dozen innocent men, perhaps. As many more he had used — safe within the law himself — to further his purposes, and then sacrificed them to justice to keep his own name clean. At thirty-five, Barton Kline was drawing a salary of fifty thousand dollars per annum from Corbin Motors, and still he was not content. His belief in his capabilities approached a mania. At fifty, he saw no reason why he should not be another financial meteor as sensational as that German, Hugo Stinnes, who in ten years multiplied a scant million into the greatest fortune in the world, it was reputed.

Such was the goal of his consuming ambition. And the Reese-Dejeans motor was the next pawn to be drawn into the game he played. Like a chess genius, Kline had the ability to engage several opponents at the one time. Against the stiff opposition of Jack Reese and his partner, he played for the secret of their still unpatented motor plans. Those once obtained, he had worked out the proper moves to checkmate his ruthless employers, the Geneva Corporation, and divert the plans to his

own purposes. The last game — against Joel Corbin's dissolute son — was already won. In Kline's safe at the moment reposed papers which, he believed, would ultimately give him access to the Corbin millions!

Kline started up from his chair. From beyond the door penetrated subdued voices in the rear hallway. The Corbin manager looked to assure himself that the shades were all tight drawn, and quickly picked up a book. And when the butler a moment later ushered in Massey and the woman referred to as "Dolly," Kline was apparently engrossed in his reading. Of his accomplices he demanded success; but never did he show to them the importance he attached to this success — unless they failed.

"Well?" he asked casually, glancing up.

Massey came forward nervously. His face was bruised and swollen. One of his eyes was nearly closed. The other reflected an inward panic that was barely held in leash.

"You've got to get me out of this mess, Kline," he whimpered. "There's a thirty-year stretch hanging over me for this job if I'm caught; and you're to blame, damn you!"

"You failed?" Kline barked.

Massey reached inside his coat, and flung the packet of plans to his master with a gesture of impotent rage.

"Always thinking of yourself first, aren't you, Bart?" he snarled. "I'm coming clean with you,

though. There's the plans. But Reese recognized me. I just got away from him by the skin of my teeth. Dolly and I gave him and that wild frog partner of his the slip in the mountains about a half hour ago. But they'll kill me sure if they ever see me again." Querulously, all but incoherently, the story tumbled out between chattering teeth. "I'm through, Bart. You haven't any right to force me to do anything more. I—"

"We'll see about that later," Kline cut in contemptuously. "Where's my car?"

"Half-way down the block. We rushed right here before Reese could send out a description —"

"You fool!" Kline snapped erect. "Stevens! telephone the police. Machine stolen. Just discovered loss when I came home from Corbin's. Understand? Hurry!" He turned to the girl. "Tell me exactly what happened, Dolly. You don't seem to have lost your nerve."

The girl coolly finished removing her gloves and laid them on the Chesterfield. With a wan smile she seated herself on the arm of Kline's chair, flushing with gratification when the plant manager casually encircled her waist.

"No, I haven't lost my nerve, Barton," she laughed. "But Sam's right, it *was* nip and tuck for a while. I managed my part all right, and the fire was a huge success." She went on to recount the experiences of the night. "But," she finished, "if I hadn't thought of circling down to the machine and borrowing the gas to come back, things

might have turned out a whole lot worse than they are."

"Good girl," Kline approved, patting her shoulder. "I knew you'd put it across, Dolly. And you won't have to worry at all. Reese couldn't have identified you, hardly, from a distance, while you and Sam were making your getaway; and circumstantial evidence won't get him anywhere against the alibi we'll cook up. There are lots of Corbin sedans. But I'd never have forgiven myself if —" Suddenly he lunged from his chair. In the hallway the front door buzzer was sounding sharply.

"The bulls!" Massey moaned. "They're after me!" Kline ignored him.

"Answer it, Steven's!" he called guardedly. "I'm not at home, remember, unless it's the police. If it's they, keep them waiting as long as you can in the reception hall while I get things arranged." He turned sharply to the girl. "Dolly, you take Massey up to my bedroom until the coast is clear. Both of you will have to stay here tonight anyhow, until I can figure out some plan to get you away. Go up the back way — as fast as you can!"

Kline waited a moment until they were gone. Then he darted to the wall beside the fireplace and shoved back a cleverly joined walnut panel that hid a small wall safe. A few twirls of the knob, while voices raised in heated altercation sifted in from the front hall, and the steel door swung open. Kline stuffed the motor plans inside.

Suddenly he spun half around, tore some business papers from his pocket, and began to thumb through them absorbedly. A half second later the door from the front hallway opened. In the entry, breathing heavily, stood Jack Reese!

"I won't need you again tonight, thanks, Stevens," Kline said quietly, without glancing up. And quickly, but without seeming haste, he placed the papers in the safe, turned down the bolt lever, and spun the dial.

"No, you won't need him!" Jack laughed grimly. "He happens to be in the hall enjoying a little rest in charge of my partner, Marcel Dejeans. We had an argument as to whether you were home or not, and he lost. I happened to see the light shining under the door here, and decided to investigate."

Kline stared at the intruder coldly.

"This amounts to forcible entrance, Reese," he said. "Perhaps if I call up the police this unwarranted situation will clear itself up without any further explanations."

"I wouldn't, if I were you, Kline," Jack interposed grimly. "I have a revolver in my pocket, and I'm prepared to use it if necessary. Before I leave, I intend to have a heart-to-heart talk with you."

The manager of the Corbin plant eyed him narrowly, but with no evidence of fear or apprehension.

"Under the circumstances, it looks as if the next

move is yours, then," he said, dropping into a chair. "Fire away."

Reese seated himself opposite.

"It happens," he said, "that my workshop was burned down tonight, and I was held up and robbed of my motor plans. The thief and arsonist escaped in your car. My partner got the number, and we traced it down."

"Thanks. Very thoughtful of you to tell me," Kline said, dryly. "But unfortunately you're too late to benefit me. I discovered the theft and notified the police nearly half an hour ago — upon my return from a most enjoyable evening with Miss Corbin."

Jack hunched forward in his chair.

"But it also happens that Sam Massey was the man; I recognized him," Jack burst out hotly. "He as much as admitted to me the other day that he's employed by the Geneva Corporation. And, furthermore, I'm convinced that you're in with him hand and glove. He's been here since the holdup. Coming here from the police station, I discovered your machine parked only a quarter block down the street! That proves — "

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," Kline interrupted blandly. "Massey could have obtained a hundred duplicate keys to my car without trouble in the Corbin plant. And you forget, unless you are still ignorant of the fact, that I fired my secretary recently for the identical connection you accuse me of. He threatened me at the time in front

of witnesses. And if he stole my machine and used it for a criminal proceeding, it seems plausible to suppose that he might have returned it here maliciously in an absurd effort to throw suspicion on me. Entirely aside from that, however, you would have considerable difficulty in gaining serious consideration for your rash theories in court. My position as manager of the Corbin plant might have *some* weight with even an ordinarily intelligent jury."

Jack arose and stepped over to the Chesterfield. From it he picked up a pair of ladies' tan gloves and tossed them to the other.

"Evidently the owner of these left in a hurry," he suggested, with just a shade of triumph. "And just before the shop was fired, I was requested to repair a Corbin sedan of the same model as yours for a young lady who later escaped with Massey. Incidentally, she wore gloves of this identical shade. I have a good eye for color and can't be mistaken. That clinches it, Kline. You're in on this theft, and those plans have been — or will be — turned over to you. I want them back. What do you intend to do?"

Barton Kline stood up, without haste and without exhibiting any particular perturbation.

"Perhaps a million pairs of gloves of that color have been manufactured this year," he scoffed. "These particular ones were left here early this evening by a young lady who called on me. She is of unimpeachable character, and there is no reason

to suppose that she won't be willing to swear to their ownership if need be. Apart from that, I might point out that even your circumstantial case against the lady who asked you for assistance, you say, is absolutely valueless unless you can positively identify her as the same you saw driving off with Massey. Can you?" he shot out abruptly.

"No." Jack let slip the admission. "I couldn't, but —"

"Well, then!" Kline cut in incisively. "That eliminates the last of your insane theories. Massey is the only one you have a case against. Now I'm a patient man, Reese. I can even sympathize with you for your loss, though you probably won't credit the fact. You're not yourself tonight. I realize that, too. And I've let you rave and make your ridiculous accusations in the hope that I could show you how absurd you've been. But human nature has its limitations." He pointed toward the door. "Either you'll go — immediately — without further fuss, or I give you my word I'll swear out a warrant for your arrest and press the case to the limit. Which is it to be?"

The anger slowly died from Jack's expression in the face of the other man's forcible ultimatum. Of a sudden he realized how ill-advised had been his impetuous decision to call on the plant manager and "have it out" with him. Moreover, he perceived that Kline, for all his protestations of complete detachment from the case, had cleverly sounded him out on the strength and weakness of

his evidence. The interview had lost him much and gained him nothing. For he saw now, too, with cooler thought, that Kline had summarized a defense for himself that was unassailable.

"I'll go," he said, intensely. "But don't think for a second that I'm giving up, Kline. You're hiding behind the law now, but sooner or later you'll overplay your hand. And then my turn will come!" With that he turned on his heel and left the room. In the hall, he called Marcel from his guard duty over the butler, and together they passed out into the night.

"Ze papairs, zey were not zere, eh?" Marcel guessed, as they drove away.

"They were; I'd take an oath on it, Marcel!" Reese exclaimed. "But Kline was too smooth for me. He blocked me at every turn. Massey and the girl have been there. I even found her gloves. But that's not proof against a man of Kline's standing. And he could produce enough alibis to have us laughed out of court — and win a criminal libel case, to boot.

"Yet I'm convinced that those plans of ours are right now packed away in that little wall safe I saw in Kline's study. But I didn't have the nerve to force his hand."

For a time the partners rode on in silence. But at last Marcel spoke, tentatively.

"Ze safe; ze leetle wall safe," he mused. "Maybe it ees zat I could break open zose safe, eh?"

Jack stared at him in consternation.

"You could, perhaps, but you wouldn't, Marcel. You're on the straight and narrow now. Forget it!"

"Ze straight and narrow, eh?" Dejeans cried. "Ees it zen not ze straight and narrow to take zat wheech belongs to you? Sacre damn! have I not spent ze one year on zose plans? Have I not made ze beeg castles in ze sky, too?"

"But the law won't look at it in that way if you're caught, Marcel."

"Pouf! Ze law!" The little Frenchman snapped his fingers. "Ze law, it ees made by ze strong to keep zat wheech zey have stolen. Me, now I am ze law! Tonight, it ees too soon. But Kline weel do nozzing 'till he can get ze trusted man to copy zose plans," he shrewdly surmised. "Zere ees still time, Jacques my frien'. And me — *parbleu!* — tomorrow night I weel open zose safe. Even you, *mon ami,* cannot prevent me!"

CHAPTER VIII

REESE wisely forbore attempting to force the issue at the moment. He understood Marcel too well for that. Dejeans possessed passions easily aroused; he was a creature of quick impulses. And opposition sometimes only further welded him to an idea. Moreover, the volatile little Apache might possibly appear at breakfast with a quite different plan, if left to his own devising. Jack devoutly hoped this last would prove the case. For Marcel, once he actively embarked on a project of violence, might easily succumb to the call of his old adventurous underworld life.

Morning, however, showed no weakening in Marcel's determination. While Reese, more practically, had made the most of the few hours after midnight to sleep soundly, Dejeans had tossed restlessly, thinking, planning. His haggard features showed the strain he had been under. But his black eyes were tranquil; he had decided, irrevocably. Kline's safe was to be broken open that night. And he quietly made known this unalterable decision to Reese as they inspected the ruins of the workshop after breakfast.

"Zose plans, zey are yours, Jacques, and mine. In *la vie* — in ze lifetime — me, I have done much wrong. But for it I have always paid. Ze good

God ees weeth ze right, always, I have discovair'. Now Kline weel pay. *Parbleu!* ze plans, I weel get zem back tonight!"

Jack continued to stare moodily into the ashes.

"All right, Marcel," he replied finally, "we'll tackle the job tonight, then — together."

"But no!" Dejeans cried. "Ze reesk, it ees for me alone." He shrugged, with a wistful smile. "Marcel Dejeans, ze little Frog, he ees nozzing — "

"He's something to me; and we're partners," Jack cut in decisively. "I'm going. That settles it." And Dejeans, despite the fact that he realized only too well that his partner would be a dangerous hindrance rather than a help in the undertaking, knew that he would have to make the best of it.

For something like another hour they worked among the wreckage, retrieving here and there something of value. The motor, practically undamaged, was locked in the basement of the cottage along with what equipment Reese had managed to save before the holdup. And they made one find that somewhat lightened their gloom. On the margin of the smudged sheet of draughting paper still intact on Jack's drawing board, they discovered the scribbled formula for the bearing alloy!

Following the successful test, Jack had gone on to make a first rough sketch of the bearing itself. But neither that nor the formula was sufficiently at variance with standard usage to warrant its being hidden away. The process of molding was

the key to the non-friction feature, and that had not yet been entrusted to paper at all!

Marcel was jubilant, but Reese refused to become enthused. Even without a non-friction bearing, he knew that the motor could be made a big success by Kline or his employers. Possibly the bearing process might be disposed of for a few thousands. But that wasn't what Jack wanted. It was his ambition to manufacture the Reese-Dejeans motor.

Morosely, he wandered out into the front yard and pottered around among the flower beds, trying to find something to do to keep him from brooding. There was really nothing else to take up his time until night. He was out of a job; the plans were gone — permanently, in all likelihood. Nor was it worth while to attempt to duplicate the drawings from memory. It might be done, but weeks would be required for the task. And long before they could be completed, the originals would be filed for patent by Barton Kline's attorneys.

Slowly Reese's lips tightened. Marcel's desperate plan offered the only hope, slight though it was, he now saw plainly. Three or four days could restore the workshop; and with a couple of trusted men to help out, the Reese-Dejeans Special might still be completed in time to compete in the Girard Cup Race. If the night's venture proved successful, that would be the procedure. If not — Jack shrugged — if they failed, it wouldn't really matter much if they were captured. In that event, at

least, he would never have to accuse himself that he had not made every possible effort to regain what was rightfully his.

Engrossed in his troubled thoughts, Jack did not hear the soft purr of the motor quietly coming to a stop at the curb behind him. But he turned quickly to answer the soft voice which laughingly repeated the first unheard greeting. Rita Corbin, clad in a tweed knicker suit and a pair of serviceable hiking boots, jumped down from the driver's seat of her chummy roadster and came forward to meet him. She knew nothing of the disaster of the past night; and a cry of amazement escaped her at sight of Jack's face, which still bore evidences of Massey's vicious attack.

"You positively look like the morning after the night before, Jack," she said. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd think you might have turned prize-fighter. What could have happened to you?"

"You ought to see the other fellow," Reese grinned. "I'd still like to," he added ruefully. "I fell for a Cleopatra smile, Rita, and the lady rewarded my youthful inexperience by having me knocked out and my workshop here burned down." He proceeded to explain the details, omitting only the unfortunate encounter with Barton Kline.

"I'm awfully sorry, Jack," Rita sympathized sincerely. "Dad was telling me the other day about the things you're trying to do, so I know what this loss means to you. But I know, too, that you'll succeed in the end, somehow; and I'm not

going to let you mope around here all day as I found you. I really came to drag you away from your work and make you take me out in the hills for the day — as you promised to do weeks ago. It's a glorious day, and I brought a lunch along to make sure you wouldn't beg off."

The girl's outspoken faith in him was more heartening to Reese than he would have cared to admit. And in his despondent state, the chance of a carefree day in her company was nothing less than a godsend.

"Barkis is willin'. I can't resist the double inducement," he laughed.

"The double inducement?" Rita queried innocently.

"The lunch and the fine day, I mean."

"I'm going to buy you one of those books on etiquette," Rita pouted. "It's strictly against the rules to refuse to give a compliment when the lady expects it."

Jack surveyed her trim habit with open admiration.

"Words fail me," he admitted. "When a girl can wear a knicker suit without detracting from her charms, as you can, she ceases to be a mere human. She's a — a divinity!"

"Stop!" the girl cried, in mock alarm. "I insist on remaining human at least until after we've had lunch! So let's get started before it's too late. Shall we take your machine?" she suggested tactfully.

"If there's any possible way of helping you into a cut-down without violating more than twelve rules of etiquette," Reese said, leading the way into the back yard.

Rita glanced appraisingly at the big racer Jack had bought in Los Angeles.

"That's my latest folly," he told her. "I bought it last week. It's an old-time racing machine. Right now it isn't much to look at, but I hope to remodel it."

"Let's take it anyhow," Rita suggested animatedly. "It looks romantic, and I've never ridden in a real racing car."

Reese helped her to climb into the cockpit. It was more roomy and comfortable than the cut-down, and at least as reliable, despite its worn condition. And the tires, with patching material and re-liners in the tool box, were good enough to chance the luck of the road.

"Where to, now?" Reese asked, as they turned into the street. "Yours to command, you know."

"Let's go through the old San Andreas Mission first," the girl proposed. "Then, if the car behaves, we can ride on up to Pinto Springs at the summit for lunch."

"I guess we can make it," Jack agreed. "The road's in pretty bad shape after the rains, probably, but we ought to be able to pull the worst of it in low."

To Reese, the experiences of the morning were like the ministration of some soothing lotion.

Prey to a consuming anxiety though he was, he could not be insensible to the mere joy of living on such an occasion. Beside him sat Rita Corbin, vivacious, responsive, yet fitting into his every mood as if a part of it. The valley orange groves lay swathed in the languorous spring sunshine. A tempering breeze rustled gently down from off the mountains to the eastward. And the dirt road, gradually ascending into the hills with many sharp turnings, opened an ever-changing vista of springtime at every bend.

Cupped in the hills, lay the ruins of Mission San Andreas. Half of its once-imposing arches were fallen, trellises now for masses of creeping roses. Bees bustled industriously from flower to flower. And water purled gently over the lip of a weed-clogged fountain.

A half of the main building remained standing, however, with a bell still pendent beneath its sturdy beam of mountain oak. And over this remnant of the Padres' faith and devotion yet watched the humble hand of an aged worshiper. White-haired Father Gregory, caretaker by his own wish, each night tolled the Angelus; while his days of peaceful meditation were occasionally enlivened by the visit of an interested passer-by.

To Jack and Rita he opened up his heart. He showed them the remaining treasures of the place — moldy parchment manuscripts centuries old and service vestments brought in galleons from Spain.

The cloistered peace of the mission, the gentle

faith of its aged servitor, were all doubly impressive to Reese. After all, he wondered, was happiness to be found in material things? Father Gregory, frugally eking out his fading years closely attuned to nature, had found content. While he, young and worldly in his ambitions — that night he planned forcibly to enter another's premises and rob a safe! Overwhelmed with a sudden repugnance, Reese determined to make, on his return, a more determined attempt to dissuade Marcel from the lawless venture.

Father Gregory bade his visitors a friendly adieu.

"Yes, go on to the summit," he advised. "You are the first to go by here in a week, but I know the road to be passable. And youth should go to meet the springtime in the high places." He sighed, but without regret, as he advised from the experience of years whose span was nearly full. "You are children yet. Like this road here, your lives will have many turns and steep ascents. Face them patiently and with clean hearts. For the summit is closer than you think — now. May it bring you happiness." And murmuring a gentle benediction, he slowly turned away.

It took an hour, mostly in low speed, to reach Pinto Springs. The old racer, missing frequently, plunged gallantly up the last pitch and stopped. Jack clambered out.

"I guess it must be about boiled dry," he said, "so I'll wait until it cools a little to refill the radi-

ator. And I'll admit I'm more than ready to tackle that lunch basket."

With luncheon over, they decided to hike along the ridge to a point where an unobstructed view might be had both east and west. It was only a walk of two or three miles, Rita said, over a well-defined trail.

"I've been there a dozen times and know the way perfectly," she overrode Jack's weak objections. "We can be back to the car easily before dark. And for Heaven's sake, Jack, smoke your pipe if you want to. You look absolutely miserable."

"I am," Reese admitted. "I feel like a stuffed turkey. But the walk will fix me up. It's after two, though, so we'll have to move right along."

The hike to Lookout Point, as Jack had predicted without knowing the way, occupied well over an hour. Windfalls and slides caused by the winter storms blocked the trail in numerous places, requiring wide detours and stiff climbing at times.

But the view unfolded to them as they dropped down a sharp descent to their objective was worthy of the labor expended to gain it. Lookout Point lay at the northernmost end of the ridge, a bare and precipitous eminence commanding the wide horizons. To the east lay the desert, naked and sere, practically uninhabited. Turning about, however, the scene shifted as if by magic. Instead of a barren waste of sand and raw rock, the forested mountains billowed down to smiling valleys. Streams silvered the cañon depths,

hurtling downward to the sun-swept Pacific. And coasting vessels smudged the horizon with their smoke.

"It's wonderful, isn't it, Jack?" Rita breathed. "Just like fairyland, or dreams come true. I — I hate to go back."

Reese glanced anxiously at his watch.

"It's great, all right!" he agreed enthusiastically. "But we'll have to be scooting, I'm afraid. It's four o'clock already, and it gets dark pretty early, you know."

"Prude!" Rita smiled. "The busybodies in Tres Arroyos have given my case up as hopeless long ago. But I know a short-cut back to the main trail that will save us fifteen minutes at least, so don't worry. We'll strike it by just going along on this level instead of climbing."

Jack followed the girl's positive directions to the letter. But after twenty minutes of strenuous walking the short-cut was still "just a little further." Jack became frankly alarmed.

"We can't go back," he pointed out. "If we did, we'd surely get caught in the dark. And we can't possibly climb these cliffs above here to the ridge. So we'll just have to follow along parallel to it and hope the brush stays thin enough to get through. I don't want to frighten you, Rita, but we'll be in a genuine fix if we don't reach the road before dark. These nights are pitch black."

"I'm not tired." Rita attempted a smile. "Maybe we can try to go a little faster."

Close to the horizon now, the sun seemed to be sinking more rapidly. And with its setting would end all chance of following a safe course along the mountainside. Reese increased his pace unconsciously from moment to moment, breaking a way through the brush. The girl kept up gamely for another hour. Then, of a sudden, she dropped to the ground.

"I can't drag myself another step," she admitted, fighting back the tears. "I'm tired out — all over. I guess — we'll have to camp here."

Jack dropped to his knees beside her and gathered her into his arms.

"I'm sorry; I should have been more thoughtful," he said, contritely. "I'll carry you, if you don't mind. We'll have to keep on until the last minute. It can't be far now."

Smiling mistily, Rita clasped one arm around his shoulder to steady herself in his arms.

"I'm a regular baby," she said. "And you're a dear, Jack, not to scold me for causing you all this trouble and worry."

Reese trembled in spite of himself. Rita Corbin always before had seemed to him as a thing of dreams, almost unreal at times. He had forced himself to regard her in that one light; and the illusion had grown on him as their friendship ripened. But now, close-held in his arms, she revealed herself as a trustful and tired bit of sheer womanhood. She was not inaccessible, he saw, if he chose to forget the difference in their positions.

Half-unconsciously, Jack drew his arms closer about her. She lowered her head to his shoulder to escape a brushing branch, allowing it to remain there trustfully, afterward.

Ahead, Reese could see through the twilight what seemed to be a break in the brush. They would have to stop there, he decided. It was almost dark, and wood must be collected for a fire before the falling of night made it impossible.

He worked his way to the edge of the clearing — and stopped. Before him, not a hundred feet away, was the dim ribbon of the road! More, on the far side loomed the familiar bulk of his own machine, and another. By some unguessed instinct of direction, he had laid a course through the brush and evening dusk directly back to Pinto Springs!

"We're back, thank the Lord!" he cried, helping the girl to her feet. "Luck was certainly with us, Rita — " He paused abruptly. With his exclamation, the lights of the second machine snapped on. The car was a Corbin sedan, with two bullet-shattered window panes to identify it. And to further verify its ownership, the lights revealed the thick-set form and scowling features of Barton Kline!

CHAPTER IX

THE Corbin manager came forward to meet the others. He bowed formally to Jack, addressing himself particularly to Rita — somewhat possessively.

" I telephoned you late this afternoon, and your maid told me that you had planned to come up here for the day," he related glibly. " And knowing the dangerous condition of the road, naturally I was worried. So I decided to trail along and assure myself of your safety. Of course, I had no idea of intruding at all — none whatever. But when I ran across your — ah — car still away up here at nightfall, the circumstance seemed — ah — unusual enough to warrant my waiting. I hope I haven't offended you, Rita, but ——" His ardent glance completed his justification.

" Certainly not!" the girl replied. " It was very thoughtful of Barton, wasn't it, Jack?"

" Very!" Reese echoed hollowly.

" We got lost," Rita went on, laughing. " And Jack played the part of a movie hero to perfection; he carried me! But I'm recovered now, and I'll gather up the lunch things while you get the machine started, Jack. I'm not absolutely helpless, thank goodness!"

Barton Kline, glowering darkly, followed Reese to the old racing car.

"Why waste time by trying to carry out the deception?" he queried, as soon as they were out of earshot of the girl. "I've spoiled your little game, Reese, so you might as well make the best of it."

Jack snapped erect from a fruitless effort to turn over the motor.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I suppose you don't know that your radiator is bone dry and that the pistons are frozen tight?" Kline sneered. His tone was openly insulting, and his face was livid with a jealous passion. "I've been onto your game for a long time, Reese. You played for big stakes, but you were bound to lose. I didn't want to distress Miss Corbin with an unpleasant scene, so I trumped up that story about 'phoning this afternoon. However, it may interest you to know that I've had you constantly watched ever since I fired you. Otherwise, your little scheme, raw as it is, might have gotten over."

Jack took a step forward.

"And just what is that 'little scheme' of mine you have all figured out so nicely, Kline?" he asked in a choked voice.

"A broken-down machine; a deserted road; impossible to go the fifteen miles to the mission in the dark!" the plant manager barked out his accusation. "That's your raw scheme, you young pauper! You were deliberately trying to compromise Miss Corbin so that ——"

Jack's fist shot out. The blow caught Kline flush

on the point of the jaw and dropped him to the ground. Jack struck out again in a blind fury as the other staggered to his feet. And this time the plant manager remained where he fell, unconscious!

Rita came running up, and bent down over the limp form.

"I'm sorry ——" Jack began miserably.

"Sorry!" Rita exclaimed scornfully, her eyes flashing. "You should be utterly ashamed of yourself! I didn't think that you could be so ungrateful as to resent Mr. Kline's thoughtfulness. Certainly you showed the greatest lack of consideration for me." Kline sat up weakly, and she dabbled at his bleeding lips with her tiny handkerchief. "It was brutal!"

Jack's face hardened. He was worn out with fighting through the brush, doubly burdened with Rita's weight part of the way. He had done everything humanly possible to save her from discomfort and to protect her name from evil-minded gossip. And this second unjust accusation, coming hard on the heels of Kline's crude suggestions, was too much for his self-control. Under the circumstances, it did not occur to him that the girl might also be somewhat unstrung, or that her interpretation of the encounter was entirely logical to one witnessing it from a distance without having heard the plant manager's insulting preamble to it.

"Perhaps, then, you'd prefer to ride back to town with Mr. Kline," he blurted out.

"I would — most certainly!" Rita flamed, "unless you have some explanation to offer for your cowardly act — or are ready to apologize to Mr. Kline."

Reese shook his head stubbornly.

"I can't explain, Rita; and I won't ever apologize — to him. I'm glad I did it. Glad!"

The girl turned away. Solicitously she helped the plant manager into his machine, taking the wheel herself. In a moment the sedan started down the grade. And Jack, watching with a dull ache in his heart, could not see that Rita relented even so far as to give him a parting glance.

Among a tumult of varied emotions, one thought stood out clearly in Reese's brain. Barton Kline was responsible for this lost friendship which meant so much to him. The plant manager had craftily baited him into a violent retaliation. Moreover, Jack more than half believed — recalling the glancing nature of his second blow — that Kline had feigned unconsciousness to further arouse Rita's resentment.

Reese wheeled the racer to the lip of the grade, gave it a final shove, and climbed in. With the gears unmeshed, he could coast for several miles downhill; and he was determined to get back to Tres Arroyos before midnight. Forgotten was the resolve he had made in the peaceful shadows of Mission San Andreas. Father Gregory, in his quiet garden, knew nothing of the trickery of men — nor the sting of a woman's misunderstanding.

And when Marcel Dejeans finally rescued his partner from a wayside farmhouse, whence he had telephoned in, at about eleven o'clock that night, he was delighted to find him not only willing but grimly eager, to proceed to the pilfering of Barton Kline's safe!

The partners returned home first to leave the flivver, which Marcel insisted must not be left parked a few blocks from Kline's home, as Jack suggested. At that time of night it might easily become damning evidence, he explained, if discovery forced them to flee without first recovering it.

"Have it your own way," Jack grumbled. "You're the boss from now on, Marcel. Let's go."

Cutting cross-lots at the start as a safeguard from possible espionage, they made their way unobserved into the spacious grounds surrounding Barton Kline's mansion. Earlier in the day, the little Frenchman had reconnoitered from a distance, and he knew the way perfectly. Furthermore, he had found that the special policeman who guarded the homes of the wealthy made his rounds only once every hour. Tres Arroyos was an orderly community where crime was of exceptional occurrence.

It was an easy matter to follow up the curving drive in the protection of the shrubbery. The night was moonless, but the "landscaped" grounds were sufficiently open for free walking. And a hall light, left burning all night, gave the intruders their direction. But once safely behind the build-

ing, Marcel left Reese to search out the most favorable point to force an entrance.

"Wait!" he said, and was gone.

To Jack, his partner's absence seemed to extend into hours. Furtively crouched down in a clump of toyon bushes, he could only listen, without seeing. There was no sound of Dejeans' moving about. But other minatory noises came from every side. A machine stopped at a near-by home. A dog barked furiously in the next street, apparently coming closer. A measured tread which echoed hollowly along the sidewalk Reese guessed to be the policeman pacing off his rounds.

"Psst!"

Jack started up, every nerve aquiver. But it was only Dejeans, returned as noiselessly as he had gone.

"Come," he whispered. "Ze place, it ees found. It weel be easy. But you must be so quiet lak ze mouse."

Jack followed to what he judged to be a kitchen window. Marcel opened his coat and took a tool from the case slung under his arm. It was a long tire iron purloined from the flivver's repair kit to do service as a makeshift jimmy. Dejeans, wise in the ways of his past profession, had purchased no equipment that might excite suspicion.

He levered the iron under the bottom sash and pressed down tentatively. Then with more weight. There was practically no sound to the operation. The short catch screws parted noiselessly from the

soft-grained redwood frame. The window slid upward without protest; and down again.

Reese once more was forced to wait in the kitchen while Marcel spied out the plan of the first floor. But the Frenchman came back more quickly this time, playing the beam of a flashlight along the floor ahead of him. He beckoned from the doorway of the butler's pantry for Jack to join him.

"Quiet — more quiet!" he warned, though his partner tiptoed forward with the utmost care. "It ees zat you make ze noise lak ze elephant! But, no. Me, I theenk it ees safe if we are careful. Zere ees no one on zis floor, I 'ave discovair'. Come!"

On one side the pantry opened into the dining room. At the end it gave into a short hallway connecting it with Kline's combined library and study. The door to this was locked, but Marcel opened it readily with a skeleton key of his own manufacture. And as painstakingly he slid the bolt back into place when they were inside.

First of all Dejeans familiarized himself with the room. The front entrance, through which Jack had come the night before, was also locked. The window shades were drawn already, too, though little light could escape through the thick tangle of climbing roses, wickedly barbed, covering the windows. Incidentally, that checkmated Marcel's intention of leaving one of the sashes open as a possible point of escape. A third door, in the rear

wall, was half ajar, and revealed a small closet, practically empty.

"Now where ees zose safe?" the little Apache queried softly.

Reese was at a loss for a moment. He had seen the safe but once, and that while engrossed in a heated debate with Kline. And so accurately was the panel fitted over the spot that he could only locate it approximately.

Dejeans gave him the flash to hold, showing him how to shield it with his coat to keep the rays from spreading widely. Then, with the light properly directed, the Frenchman went skillfully about his work. His sensitive fingers felt along the paneling, tapping it gently.

"It's nearer the fireplace; about the height of your chest, I think," Jack whispered after a time.

Marcel moved over a couple of steps and resumed his sounding at a slightly higher level. In another moment he exhaled his breath in a soft sigh of triumph. Under his probing knuckles, the panel returned a hollow sound. After that, familiar with such mechanisms, he quickly located the false joining which pressed down to release the panel catch. The wall safe, its nickeled combination and bolt glinting under the guarded light, stood ready for the final test of Marcel's peculiar genius.

The little Apache surveyed it disdainfully.

"It ees nozzing — ze toy," he whispered. But before attacking it, he bade Jack snap off the flash.

Then he glided to both doors in turn, listening intently. He returned, smiling faintly, satisfied that these added precautions had been unnecessary.

Jack turned on the flash again, but Dejeans motioned him to shut it off. It was easier to work without it, he explained — easier to concentrate.

Reese could hear nothing. And only faintly, by straining his sight, was he able to detect the slow turning of the knurled dial under Marcel's delicate touch. On the stage he had seen "Alias Jimmy Valentine" enacted, but, too, he had heard safe experts scoff at the plausibility of it. Even with finger tips sensitized by emery paper, they had declared it next to impossible to open a safe simply by the "feel" of the tumblers.

Marcel, however, revealed no such skepticism. In fact, he had already expressed scorn at the resistant qualities of the miniature strong box. And because of its small size, the number of possible combinations was correspondingly simplified. The divisions on the dial ran only to fifty.

Marcel continued slowly to twirl the knob. His fingers and ears coördinated like those of a great musician, as a violinist who feels confidently for a complex harmony whose accuracy only his attuned ear can verify. Finally he straightened up and casually wiped the perspiration from his hands.

"Now, ze flash again," he requested guardedly, flexing his cramped fingers.

Jack switched on the light. Dejeans carefully turned the knob to the right, to the left; right once

more, and around to zero. The lever clicked down. The safe door swung open. On top of a pile of miscellaneous documents lay the packet containing the diagrams of the Reese-Dejeans motor!

With a flourish, Marcel presented it to his partner.

"Take out zose plans," he grinned, reaching into his inside coat pocket. "Me, I have some bettair ones to leave for Monsieur Kline. And perhaps zat way he weel not discovair his loss so soon." Quickly he replaced the drawings Jack had removed with some blank draughting paper and locked the safe on the dummy package. But as he drew shut the panel, he abruptly swung around with a finger pressed to his lips in warning.

Jack waited motionless, hearing only the excited tripping of his heart, while the little Apache flitted to the front door and back again.

"We must go — queeck!" he whispered excitedly. "Some one ees zere outside. No noise. Come!"

Once more the door leading into the rear hall was unlocked and opened without a sound. But Marcel stopped dead in his tracks one step beyond the threshold, his eyes wide with amazement and concern. His short knife appeared in his hand as if by magic.

Even to Reese their predicament was transparent. He, too, had heard the muffled thump of a displaced chair in the dining room and the muttered curse that followed!

CHAPTER X

DEJEANS crouched down, his body tense and rigid. Slowly and without sound, he began to edge forward toward the pantry. His eyes, mere pin points now, were blank of expression. Trapped in the dark hallway, he had no intention of giving up his liberty without a desperate struggle. Like a sinister shadow, knife raised, he chose to advance to meet whatever danger threatened rather than to cower before it.

But Reese clutched him by the shoulder, forcing him back into the library. Marcel tried to shake free, but it was impossible to evade the desperate hold without a tell-tale scuffle. At the front entrance to the study the scratching of a key was now plainly audible. The Frenchman relocked the back door and turned despairingly to his partner.

"We are trap'!" he explained fiercely. "Zere ees no way out wizout ze fight. Me, I weel hold zem off. Nevair weel we give up zose papairs — nevair!" He quickly piloted Jack into the small closet. "Jacques, it ees zat you must hide in here while I try to draw zem off — "

Reese, however, held the little Apache in a vise-like grip, pulling the closet door nearly shut after them.

"Nothing doing!" he said. "We stand or fall together. If it's Kline, we'll call for a showdown.

But if it's the police, we'll have to give up; they're only doing their duty. Quiet, now!"

With his eye close to the crack at the rear of the door, Jack could command a view of a segment of the dark library. No sound came now from the back hallway. The scratching at the front entrance had stopped. That door was slowly swinging open. A shadowy form whisked inside. The door closed again. The shadow circled the room with a clumsy effort at silence. The drawn shades rustled noisily as an unskillful hand lowered them unnecessarily to their full extremity. With a dull click, the lights switched on.

Jack barely repressed a cry of amazement. The intruder was neither Barton Kline nor a patrolman. It was young Gordon Corbin! In his one hand was a revolver; in the other was a bunch of keys which he had withdrawn from the lock after one had successfully, but noisily, released the bolt.

Joel Corbin's son stood beside the light switch for a moment, blinking, accommodating his eyes to the abrupt change from darkness. Then the keys jingled back into a pocket; and he set about the task that had brought him to Barton Kline's mansion, unlawfully, in the dead of night.

Furtively, the young ne'er-do-well produced a pinch bar and forced open Kline's desk. And with careful attention he began assorting the papers and envelopes crammed into the various pigeonholes. The contents of each envelope was scrutinized carefully before being tossed to the floor. And Cor-

bin muttered impatiently to himself at each failure to discover what he sought.

Jack relinquished his place of vantage to Marcel. He was dumfounded. As shop superintendent, he had seen enough of Gordon Corbin to know him to be entirely lacking in prudence; to know, too, that he was not without a sort of stubborn, headstrong courage. But what possible necessity could have urged him to break into Kline's home and ransack his private correspondence? What of any value would the plant manager not have secured in his safe? And what of the unknown man, still unaccounted for, who was closing in from the dining room?

Jack gave it up and resumed his watching at the door jamb above the absorbed Apache.

Entirely unsuspicious of their presence, Corbin continued his unavailing search. The floor was littered with papers he had discarded. And the top compartment of the desk had been completely rifled without result. In the act of prying open the first of the side drawers, however, he paused to listen. A look of consternation flashed across his face, superseded by one of stubborn determination. And clutching up his revolver in a hand that trembled slightly, he tiptoed slowly toward the door at which he had entered.

Even to the partners in the closet, whose view did not embrace that corner of the room, the cause of his alarm was apparent. The door had rattled violently, as if some one had suddenly thrown his

weight against it attempting to make a surprise entrance.

"Why doesn't whoever it is open it?" Jack whispered to Marcel. "Corbin didn't lock it after him."

Dejeans with an appreciative smile for a ruse whose import he recognized instantly, nodded his head to one side. Jack looked in that direction. At first he saw nothing untoward. Then his eyes caught an almost unappreciable movement. Behind Gordon Corbin's back, the knob of the rear door was turning silently; and by inches the door crept open. A hand showed in the opening next — its stubby fingers cuddling a small blued automatic! Corbin reached for the light switch. But from behind came a suave voice, halting him.

"Put up your hands, Gordon, please! And oblige me by leaving the lights on." The voice spoke gently, but there was an underlying edge to it as threatening as the snap of a blacksnake's lash.

Corbin's hands reached upward. Barton Kline, with a dressing gown thrown over his pajamas, stepped coolly into the room.

"Stevens," he called. "Please come in here now and relieve this young man of his weapon. I'm sure he won't require it any more this evening."

The butler threw open the front door and took the revolver from the young millionaire's unresisting fingers.

"I don't think I will need you any more tonight, Stevens," Kline smiled blandly. "But I must say that you managed your end of this little dénouement very nicely — very nicely, indeed. You may keep the revolver, if you wish, as a mark of my appreciation."

"Thank you kindly, sir," Stevens grinned. "I'll treasure it, sir." And he bowed his way out.

Gordon Corbin faced his captor furiously.

"Damn you, Kline!" he cried; "that's too much. I won't allow you to let your servants insult me — "

Kline gestured imperiously to a chair.

"Sit down, you young fool," he said. "And don't try any of your snobbish bluster with me. It doesn't sound well coming from a thief caught red-handed ransacking a house."

"I'm not a thief, and you know it, you filthy blackmailer!" Corbin burst out hotly. "I'm only here to try to protect a woman's reputation — "

"So that's it, eh?" the plant manager mocked, his greenish eyes blinking speculatively. "A most laudable impulse, I'd say! It's merely a coincidence, I suppose, Gordon, that by being so gallant you also are attempting to safeguard yourself? And it is really unfortunate that you didn't know until recently that Congress isn't kindly disposed toward certain kinds of inter-state romance. However, a man may always plead extenuating circumstances by marrying the woman in the case — "

"She's impossible, and you know it!" Corbin

threw aside his weak pose. "She's a damned little unprincipled leech!"

"Dolly Landon might be interested to hear that you had made such a remark," Kline remarked, dryly. "Perhaps it's my duty as a friend to tell her."

Gordon Corbin slumped back in his chair with a gesture of surrender.

"What's your price, Kline?" he choked out. "I know you have that hotel register sheet hidden around here somewhere. Name your price, and I'll pay it."

Kline raised a hand in protest.

"You misjudge me," he said. "To think that you would believe me capable of taking advantage of a friend's predicament."

"Ten thousand!"

The plant manager shook his head, smiling.

"I told you a week ago that it wasn't for sale. If I took payment for it, I would be guilty of extortion. And that would be criminal."

Beads of perspiration stood out on Corbin's forehead. He sprang from his chair.

"Twenty thousand!" he offered. "That's my limit, if I have to kill you, by God!"

Kline gestured him back into his chair with a significant movement of the pistol.

"I'm a law-abiding citizen, Gordon," he replied coolly, "and I cherish my friends. I've been keeping that document in my safe merely to protect you. It's not for sale, as I said." He paused,

eyeing the other calculatingly. "But if you really want it so badly, I might possibly arrange to transfer it to you in some less repulsive way. For instance, it just occurs to me that you might help me out — as a friend — on a certain deal which, frankly, I could engineer much easier with your assistance. Do that, and I'll be glad to return the favor by giving you that register sheet for nothing — simply as turnabout between friends."

"Go on!" Corbin prompted eagerly.

Kline settled back comfortably on the Chesterfield.

"It's simple enough, Gordon — and entirely within the law. It happens that I have certain incomplete specifications for a new and advanced type of motor. They require one addition to make them usable to me. That addition is a non-friction bearing such as, I am reliably informed, young Reese — formerly our shop superintendent, you know — has perfected. But he refuses to sell at any price — or will. In a nutshell, I want you to get that bearing for me." The plant manager glanced behind him as if some slight sound had disturbed him. But he turned back quickly, satisfied with his casual inspection. Joel Corbin's son was pointing an accusing finger at him.

"I've got your number now, Kline," he exclaimed. "It was you who engineered the burning down of Reese's workshop and the stealing of his plans. Massey is only your tool." His eyes widened with sudden full comprehension. "Why,

you're nothing but a damned spy for Geneva Motors!"

Barton Kline smiled impassively. It appeared that he rather enjoyed this cat and mouse situation — wherein his was a position of complete dominance.

"I wouldn't air that startling theory very widely, if I were you, Gordon," he suggested urbanely. "In fact, it might be better if you weren't to speak of it even to your father. You mustn't forget, you know, that I can always have you jailed for breaking into and entering my home tonight. And then, too, we haven't come to an understanding about those Dolly Landon papers as yet."

Corbin sank back in his chair, glowering like a cornered beast.

"I won't take a hand in your dirty work, Kline," he said. "I've learned my lesson, and I'm going to play the game square from now on. I didn't wrong Dolly Landon to begin with, and you know it. It was a clever frame-up such as a dozen wealthy young fellows have been trapped into in the last year."

"Possibly," Kline shrugged. "But as sure as the Lord made little apples, you'll be convicted if the case comes to trial. You realize that, too, or you wouldn't be here. And such being the situation, it might be better for you to consider my proposition. It's quite simple, and entirely legal. You merely will have to go to Reese and apologize for that mix-up you had in the shop — "

"I would have done that before, if it wasn't for having to do it in front of that French gutter rat he's always with."

"Then you'll be killing two birds with one stone," the plant manager pointed out. "And in the course of your conversation, you can mention that you've heard Reese needs capital. Your father told me that he wants to borrow ten thousand dollars. Offer to advance him that amount — the offer wouldn't arouse his suspicion, coming from you — on a call loan, with the specifications of his new bearing at stake in case he can't meet the obligation later on."

"He wouldn't do it," Corbin objected. "He wouldn't take that risk."

"He'd jump at the chance," Kline insisted. "He doesn't understand business methods very well, and if you made it clear that you'd give him all the time he needed, he'd take your word for it. In a month he can do over the plans he lost. Unfortunately, however, I have — ah — similar plans all ready to be filed in the patent office. A man leaves Detroit tomorrow to come out here to revise and — ah — redraw them in suitable form for me. He's a reputable young inventor, and the patents will be made out in his name — with certain restrictions. That will, of course, protect me from any unjust suspicion such as yours."

The plant manager smiled complacently.

"I'm merely telling you all this, Gordon, so that you'll see that you will be harming Reese in

no way by helping me. On the contrary, you will practically be donating ten thousand dollars to him. The bearing is useless to him without a motor to put it into, that's obvious. So, simply sign over your agreement with him to me, and I'll give you whatever incriminating evidence I possess against you. It's an eminently fair proposition all around."

"It's a damnable robbery!" Corbin cried. "I won't do it!"

"But you will, Gordon," Kline contradicted sharply. "You'll do it tomorrow. Because if you don't, you'll be hailed up before a United States District Judge in a week's time. Dolly Landon is in Los Angeles now, ready to take the witness stand when I give the word. Her testimony, alone, might be discounted, it is true. But backed by the evidence that I have — in your own handwriting — no lawyer in the world could keep you out of a Federal prison for two years at the least. And a scandal, unfortunately, often reacts in other serious ways. Fathers have been known to disinherit their sons for less."

Gordon Corbin rose from his chair. But there was no need for Kline's significant motion with the weapon in his hand. Corbin's nerve was gone. His face was chalk white, and his whole body was atremble.

"I'll do it," he groaned. "I'll have to do it! You're an unmitigated scoundrel, Kline, but you've got me cornered. I'll see Reese tomorrow."

"But, remember," Kline warned, "that even after you have the evidence I'll give you, it won't be advisable for you to broadcast any of the confidences I've entrusted to you tonight. Your present rather — ah — informal visit here would make such a step decidedly indiscreet — decidedly so." He motioned Corbin to precede him from the room. "Permit me. Perhaps it would be more convenient for you to leave through the front door instead of by the dining room window at which you entered."

With the departure of Kline and his enforced ally from the library, the closet door opened slowly. First Reese came out; then Marcel. The latter was smiling, but Jack was sober-faced. The witnessing of the complete moral breakdown of old Joel Corbin's son had sickened him.

"Get me out of here as quickly as you can, Marcel," he begged. "Just to be in here makes a fellow feel like committing murder!"

CHAPTER XI

It was close on two o'clock when the partners reached home after an uneventful escape from Kline's mansion. But Reese was up at daybreak, arranging his materials for the busy days ahead. First of all he wanted to complete the motor specifications and get them safely entered at the patent office. If all went well, it might be several days before Kline discovered the substituted papers in the packet in his safe; and those few days, well utilized, could put the Reese-Dejeans plans out of all danger from the avaricious plant manager.

With this in view, Jack went down to the basement and secured the board and drawing equipment he had rescued from the flaming workshop. These he arranged handily in his bedroom before breakfast, ready for work. And over the morning meal, he and Dejeans mapped out a comprehensive plan for the labors of the coming week. Every minute would count from now on, especially with the date of the Girard Cup Race drawing dangerously near. One more setback, however slight, and the Reese-Dejeans Special would never be completed in time to enter in the event. And the winning of the prize money was now more imperative than ever.

"I'll tackle the plans, Marcel," Jack suggested;

"and perhaps you'd better take a boy out the Mission road to begin with and tow in the old wreck I left out there last night. Then hire a contractor to throw together another shop for us in a hurry. Offer him a bonus if necessary to get him right on the job with a crew. Two days is the most we can allow him, as I'll have the drawings in shape by then, and we'll want to get right at the making of the machine. Last of all, rustle around and rake up at least two good mechanics — men you know will keep their mouths shut — to help on the motor. We can't possibly finish the job in time alone." He stood up. "Let's get moving."

Followed a busy morning for Reese. But with hope once more restored, he attacked his job enthusiastically. And by noontime he had a formidable mass of neatly diagrammed sheets to his credit. Part of it was in duplicate, but the second sheets — for his own use in the actual construction work — required far less painstaking care than those going to the patent office; and necessary notations could be made in longhand instead of the slower print.

In his concentration, the unpleasant events of the previous day and night slipped from his mind. Subconsciously, however, they persisted. His brows remained knitted together in a frown that was not entirely the result of his calculations over the drawing board. Still endured the sting of Rita's misunderstanding and the feeling of great loss, the boyish hatred of Barton Kline, and the contempt —

and, in a way, pity — he felt for Gordon Corbin. These were deep-rooted in him, and no probable eventuality would change them. Rita would continue to despise him, as he despised her wastrel brother. While Barton Kline, with his many irons heating in the fires of his ambition, would continue likewise to hate and be hated until either he or Reese was permanently disposed of.

It was shortly after lunch that Jack was interrupted by a knock on his bedroom door. It was Mother McGuire, come to announce a visitor.

"I towld him ye was out, and that ye'd given orders that ye wasn't to be disturbed, both," she said, "but the young idjit won't take no fer an answer. 'Tell him it's Misther Corbin,' says he, 'and I'll be ever so much obliged to ye, mum. It's important.'"

Jack started at mention of Corbin's name. It was inevitable, of course, that the old land baron's son should come to present Kline's infamous proposal; but Reese had given no thought as yet to some method of countering it successfully. Other considerations had weighed on him too heavily in the last few eventful hours. Yet counter it he must, he felt, and in some way that would thwart Kline without arousing his suspicions. Not for young Gordon's sake, but for Rita's. Notwithstanding the girl's humiliating leavetaking of the night before, Jack still cared for her too deeply to permit her name to be drawn even indirectly into a scandal if it could be prevented. And it would break the

proud heart of Joel Corbin to see his only son a butt for the muckraking yellow press.

On the other hand, Reese knew that the boy was individually unworthy of his aid. He was snobbish to a degree, had made Jack's firm insistence that he keep from meddling in the Corbin shop a subject for open sneers more than once; and only last night there had been a tense moment in Kline's closet, while Reese restrained the furious Dejeans with difficulty, when Corbin had referred to the little Frenchman as a Paris gutter rat or some such opprobrious thing.

But these slurs must be overlooked for Rita's sake and because of the debt Jack felt he owed her kindly father. He nodded to the waiting Mrs. McGuire.

"Have him come up, please," he said. But on second thought, he changed his mind. "No, I'll go down to see him. I'd rather he wouldn't get a look at this layout here."

Gordon Corbin was waiting uncomfortably and ill at ease in Mother McGuire's spick-and-span parlor when Jack entered the room. His cheeks glowed a dull red, and despite an attempted ease, his eyes refused to meet squarely the level glance that was directed toward them. Nor had the failure of his conscience to transcend his fear of exposure in any way improved his habitually dissipated appearance. He looked what he was — a pampered boy faced with a crisis too big for his wealth-enfeebled manhood to meet honestly.

Even at that, Reese could almost find a feeling of sympathy for the other. Perhaps, as Corbin had insisted, he was the victim of a frame-up; and he had rejected Kline's proposition until the screws were applied unbearably. Doubtless, too, he had considered what shame his disgrace would bring to his father and sister.

All these thoughts flashed over Jack as he waited for Gordon to speak first. That much, at least, was due him, he felt. The overtures, however difficult and unusual for him, should come from Corbin.

"Reese," the boy said, with painful hesitancy, "I came to apologize to you. I — well, I'm sorry for that nasty mess I dragged you into at the plant a while back. I was wrong — all wrong. And I guess I've acted the cad toward you a good many more times than I realize even now." His voice, genuinely sincere, broke for a moment. His eyes, filming almost to the point of tears, had in them an expression of tragedy. "But these last few days I've come to realize a lot of things I'd never paid much attention to before. And I want you to know that I regret all the trouble I've ever caused you. I do; I do, really!" His hands clenched spasmodically. "And God knows I have troubles of my own to teach me the lesson!"

Jack was surprised — and pleased — by Corbin's sincere apology. And the boy's obvious distress touched him. He held out his hand impulsively.

"I'll be glad to forget the past and be friends," he said. "And if I can ever help you out in any way, just call on me."

Gordon hesitated. For a moment he seemed on the verge of accepting this opening for confidences. But quickly his fear of Kline redominated his better nature.

"Thanks; that's good of you," he replied, and hurried on to present the unworthy offer that was Barton Kline's price. Evidently he had rehearsed the part, for he broached the subject with a glibness that in ordinary circumstances would have been truly convincing. He offered the loan of ten thousand dollars in a way that could not offend Jack's pride, and by frankly explaining the mechanism of a "demand" note, robbed it of any suspicious significance. Banks handled their loans in that manner, he explained, even though option of payment was extended often for years. And Reese could have all the time he needed. As for security, he'd leave that more or less up to Jack.

"But I suppose you'll want to offer something as collateral," he qualified, smiling. "That's business, and I know you wouldn't care to accept my offer in any other way."

Jack shuddered inwardly. As Kline had told Corbin last night — and he recognized the truth of it now — he was the veriest greenhorn in financial matters. And had he not been forewarned, he would have blindly accepted the boy's offer in the best of faith. He would have utilized the money

— and later paid the penalty in full. His word alone, even without a written agreement, would have forced him to meet the obligation.

But now he chose to accept the offer with full realization of its purpose. He paved the way cleverly for a natural entrance of the non-friction bearing into the discussion. And when Gordon eagerly professed himself willing to accept all rights to it as the stipulated forfeit in case of default, Jack himself insisted that the agreement be made in writing. So the contract was drawn up; Mother McGuire witnessed the signatures; and Reese, with a check for ten thousand dollars in one hand, bade good-by to Gordon Corbin.

Jack returned to his work only half-heartedly. He kept wondering whether he had handled the interview with Corbin from quite the proper angle. Not that he had endangered the motor in part through placing a loan on it. He had no intention whatever of using the money; he had simply fallen in with Kline's scheme to pull young Gordon's chestnuts out of the fire — for the sake of his sister and father. And the check would be deposited intact in the Tres Arroyos Bank, ready to meet a demand at any time.

But he began to doubt that he had really aided the boy materially by accepting the loan. The notion persisted that Barton Kline was not the man to relinquish his hold on Joel Corbin's son for so moderate a service; somehow, he was sure, the plant manager's Machiavellian mind would pro-

duce some method to continue his thrall over so valuable a tool. And Kline, an admitted employee of Geneva Motors, could bring ruin to the Corbin interests by forcing the son to play traitor to his father.

That was one angle to be considered. Too, there was the horrible possibility of Rita marrying Barton Kline, never suspecting the manner of man he was. And this was no remote possibility, either. Kline had the facility of being all things to all people, and he undoubtedly possessed an ingratiating personality when he chose to exercise it. And to an impressionable girl, the mere dropping of his sophisticated pose was in itself a subtle compliment. Rita was undoubtedly more than ordinarily interested in him.

Jack thought of exposing the plant manager to Joel Corbin and his daughter. But he saw at once how helpless he was in that respect. He could produce no proof. If he asked Gordon to substantiate him, the boy would naturally deny any knowledge of the facts through fear of reprisal on Kline's part. As for himself, he could hardly confess that his information was the result of a safe robbery or of unlawful espionage in Kline's study. And that last would force him to betray Gordon. But he was grimly determined that if the worst came to the worst — that is, if Rita announced her engagement to Barton Kline ever — he would make any sacrifice to prevent a marriage that could only result in disillusionment and tragedy.

In another two days the motor plans were completed and sent off by registered mail to a reliable patent attorney in San Francisco. In the same time a new workshop was completely erected over the ashes of the old one. All necessary equipment stood ready for beginning work on the Reese-Dejeans Special on the morrow. Marcel had hired two trustworthy mechanics to assist in the work. And he had himself stripped the old racer of its motor and prepared it to be fitted with new wings of speed.

That evening Jack took sober account of his remaining capital. It was discouragingly small. Aside from the ten thousand dollars borrowed from Gordon Corbin, which he subtracted from his bank balance, there remained barely enough to complete the car, pay the entry fee for the Girard Cup Race, and meet the stiff expense of wear and tear during the actual contest.

If he failed to win a place in the event, he would be penniless. Moreover, if even some slight setback occurred before that time — if some unforeseen expense of, say, two hundred dollars had to be met — he would have to scratch the Reese-Dejeans from the list of entrants. Funds would be lacking to meet the bare cost of running the race. Nor could Marcel be counted on for help in that regard. With true Parisian prodigality, he spent his money as he made it. Financially, he was a liability rather than an asset.

The doorbell rang. Reese was sitting alone in

the living room, while Marcel ostensibly assisted Mother McGuire with the dishes, so he went to the door. As he opened it, he snapped on the porch light. But at first sight of his visitor he could not believe his eyes. Somehow, however, he managed an uncertain greeting.

"Won't you come in? Please do," he said, banally enough, still all but speechless with amazement.

Rita Corbin accepted a chair beside the hearth fire with the quiet composure that seems to be a peculiarly feminine virtue in difficult social situations. Although hers was a far more trying position than Jack's, she was actually much the calmer of the two. Reese was frankly up in the air. All at the one time he was puzzled, delighted — and apprehensive. For it was apparent that only some considerable readjustment of Rita's viewpoint could have brought her here. And beneath her calm, she was obviously holding herself in under great tension. Jack stared at her speechlessly until she spoke.

"You look as if you were seeing a ghost, Jack!" she smiled wanly. "But you're not. You only see a very humble little person who's sorry — dreadfully sorry! — for having misjudged you."

"You've found out, then —?" Jack began.

Rita shook her head.

"No; I still only know what I saw at Pinto Springs, if that's what you mean. But I've found out other things to-day — things that I can't tell

you about — that make me know you must have been in the right despite appearances. Even before that, though — when I thought it all over at home that night — I was ashamed of myself. I shouldn't have doubted you — "

"We were both upset and worn out," Reese disparaged. "And I won't allow you to apologize to me, Rita. My nasty temper was responsible for it all."

The girl ignored this as she hurried on to unburden herself of other matters that oppressed her mind.

"Jack, my brother has confessed to me that he loaned you ten thousand dollars. You mustn't spend that money. You mustn't! I can't tell you why, but — "

Reese drew close and took one of Rita's hands in his.

"Rita, we've known each other a long time now. I believe you know that I can be trusted. You're in trouble — indirectly, at least — I'd be blind if I didn't see that. Won't you let me try to help you?"

The girl stood up hurriedly. Her composure deserted her of a sudden. Tears brimmed in her eyes — eyes strangely like her brother's when for an instant they showed a haunting gleam of fear.

"You can do nothing — nothing to help me. I must be going," she said, brokenly. "But I have one more request. I'd like you to come to an informal affair at the house tomorrow evening. It

was hurriedly arranged — from necessity. Aside from that, it's wrong to ask you, I know. But — but I feel as if I must have one true friend there to give me the courage to go through with it — "

"I'll come, gladly," Jack interposed.

"It's probably the last time you'll see me — that you'll want to see me, even," Rita said. "If you knew the details, you'd despise me."

Jack took a step toward her. But the girl was already at the door. Safely across the threshold, she turned and smiled back at him, wistfully.

"Good-by — and I'll expect you tomorrow night. But, please! — for my sake — don't ever ask me to explain."

Reese stood clutching the door knob for a long time after the lights of the girl's motor had melted into the night. What tragic crisis confronted her, he pondered, that could bring her to him with these incoherent half-confidences? How much of her brother's trouble was she familiar with? What had she learned of the true nature of Barton Kline that could cause her to reverse her opinion of the unhappy affray at Pinto Springs? And what, above all, was the significance of the party tomorrow night that must end their reëstablished friendship?

CHAPTER XII

DURING the first day's work on the Reese-Dejeans motor, Jack made one pleasing find: that the assistance of the two mechanics Marcel had hired more than doubled the progress the partners could have made alone. This was due to the fact that four men, working in conjunction, could eliminate much waste motion and duplication of labor. Also it expedited the assembling of part units.

Reese was entirely satisfied, too, that these new employees were trustworthy. They were family men who had worked under him in the Corbin plant for years, industrious and content. But with his leaving, they had found Barton Kline's autocratic ways too oppressive for their sturdy independence. And though they made no active display of their dislike for the plant manager, the fact that they had already resigned their positions when Marcel found them sufficiently indicated their small regard for Corbin's chief executive.

But Jack found little enough satisfaction in all this. Even though he worked unflaggingly with the others to get the motor completed in record time, his wonted enthusiasm, except for rare flashes, refused to return to him. He was glum and unresponsive. The day seemed interminable as it lagged along to the quitting hour. And even then he all but reduced Mother McGuire to tears by his

desultory appreciation of her care in pressing his Tuxedo.

"The lad ain't himself at all, at all," she confided to Marcel in the privacy of the kitchen after supper. "Whin I handed him his suit, he only says, 'Thank ye, Mither, it looks very nice,' and traipses on up to his room like he was in wan o' thim weejie trances."

The little Frenchman sighed ecstatically and threw a kiss ceilingward.

"Love! It ees love, Madame, zat can make even ze strongest man weak!" He pressed a half-dried saucer to his heart and sidled closer. "Me, even me it 'as made seek — "

But Mother McGuire refused all sympathy for ills so induced.

"So 'tis sick ye be, eh!" she said. "Shure, thin, a spoonful o' castor ile'll fix ye both up like new!"

Jack's preoccupation, however, was not a result of any lovelorn meditation. He was worried about Rita. The questions he had put to himself late last night still remained unanswered. Whatever the causes of the girl's strange agitation — fear, even — they continued an insolvable mystery to him. But somehow he felt certain that the solution would be found connected in some way with the sinister machinations of Barton Kline. The plant manager had betrayed a violent jealousy at Pinto Springs. Or was it only the man's ugly hatred of any one who blocked the path of his ambition? Jack won-

dered. Or was it possible that Kline had spread his web of intrigue to entangle Rita along with her brother? But that was absurd. The girl was too high-spirited, too courageous, to bow to the sheer will of any man. And no skein of circumstance could entangle her as it had young Gordon. She was as good and innocent as a Madonna. What, then?

Reese was still in a maze of baffling conjecture when he arrived at the Corbin home. He found that most of the small gathering of guests had already arrived — including Barton Kline! And several of the others seemed to be Kline's friends particularly, rather than Rita's. A fast, blasé crowd for the most part, Jack summed them up quickly, and not at all of the type customarily admitted to Rita Corbin's hospitality. Boon companions of Gordon's in the past, perhaps, but he was not present now.

Rita could spare only a moment for Jack in the beginning. Her duties as hostess prevented any intimate talk between them. And he sensed that this was somehow a relief to her. But her hand pressed his tightly in their first greeting; and her eyes, dropping their mask of happiness for the shortest space, conveyed the silent message that she was glad because of his comforting presence.

Reese gave up all effort to solve the mystery. It was beyond him. Each new development was contradictory to the last. For one thing, Kline's being here — Jack and he had already exchanged curt

nods — was certainly inconsistent with Rita's acknowledgment of her mistake at Pinto Springs. Then there was to be explained the presence of persons quite out of tone with the girl's liking in general.

But the most amazing of all was the occurrence next to take place. Rita had absented herself from the room momentarily to usher in a belated guest. Standing more or less aloof at the far end of the drawing room, Jack caught only fugitive glimpses of the newcomer as she was first being introduced around. Yet there was something oddly familiar about her. Her voice, heard fleetingly, stirred a vague response in his memory.

Reese was the last to be presented. As Rita brought the girl up, he turned fully toward them. It was the only time he had ever seen the charming face of the tardy guest in a full light, but he recognized it instantly. His mind for a moment refused to function clearly, overtaxed with a flood of unanswerable questions. The newcomer was the lone motorist who had tearfully appealed to him to "repair" her Corbin sedan; Massey's accomplice; Gordon Corbin's inamorata; the woman whom Barton Kline had referred to as Dolly Landon! It remained only for Rita's constrained introduction to absolutely verify the fact.

"Miss Landon and I have met before, I believe," Jack managed to respond evenly.

Dolores Landon's rich lips bent downward in a mocking smile.

"Yes, indeed," she admitted, surprisingly. "I can never forget your gallant rescue on that dark, if not stormy, night, Mr. Reese!"

Sam Massey's fair accomplice was entirely sure of herself, that much was evident; she knew that Reese's uncertain evidence could not bring her foul of the law. Jack followed her with his eyes while she captivated more than one male heart. But he noted also that her glance sought out Barton Kline whenever possible, studying him thoughtfully — almost broodingly. At such times her carefree pose showed itself as a thin veneer over deeper emotions — emotions sad and tinged with bitterness.

Jack wondered if she was in love with the plant manager. If so, he perceived that her love was a thing that could change to an unreasoning hatred. In her eyes lurked a hint of fiery passions easily unbridled, and magnificent though they were, their shallow vanity showed her capable of no great sacrifice — nor of condonement to one unfaithful. The butterfly might easily become the tigress. And Reese was grimly aware that Barton Kline, if he had cultivated Dolly Landon's affection only to use her as a catspaw, might find that paw finally to be barbed with lacerating talons.

However, Rita was naturally the object of most of Jack's regard. She played the adroit hostess to perfection. She threw herself into the merry-making with an abandon new to Reese. Yet while she danced with every other, she evaded him.

Time and again she marooned him with a partner just as he was hoping to have a word with her alone. So he gave over the attempt, knowing it to be her wish.

Until supper he danced with whatever partner that chance offered: with a Greenwich Village importee who confessed herself "dry as a cork leg" and who waxed indignant that he had "nothing on the hip"; with a Hollywood film star whose widow's weeds were still verdant after a short "residence" in Reno; with Dolores Landon. And it was this last whom he escorted into the dining room when supper was announced. Rita, he noted, went in with Barton Kline.

At each place was a small engraved card. But Jack was among the last to read his. Assisting Dolly Landon to be seated, he was at a loss to understand the shrill congratulations, accompanied by the boisterous waving of cards, that were showered first on Rita Corbin, then on Barton Kline. Even then he did not grasp the significance of it all. He picked up his own card curiously.

"Betrothed!"

The card crumpled into a formless ball beneath his clenching fingers. His senses seemed to reel, then to fuse into a white-hot wave of utter repulsion. The enigma was explained at last — enough of it, at least, for the present. Now he knew the reason for Rita's distraction, her need of a "true friend," for the choice of this unusual gathering of Kline's acquaintances to grace the occasion. The little

oblong slip of cardboard — a " rush " job from all appearances — had for its purpose the announcement of Rita's engagement to the plant manager!

Jack quickly realized, however, that he could not make himself conspicuous by slighting the formalities, however difficult they were for him, prescribed for such an event. Rita could not love the plant manager, of course, after her disconnected plea of last night; some overwhelming pressure must have been brought to bear on her to earn her consent. And Kline had a transparent gain to reap from the match. But whatever the conflicting motives behind the misalliance, whatever Reese's unfaltering determination to prevent its consummation, he saw that he would only make Rita's position more unbearable and direct suspicion toward himself by refusing to offer some sort of a congratulation. So he pressed a way to Rita's side, offered his felicitations briefly to the pale girl, nodded to Kline, and returned to the edge of the circle surrounding the engaged couple.

He started at a light touch on his arm. Turning, he found Dolly Landon standing beside him. Her petulant lips were smiling, but her whispered words came with the impact of so many blows.

" Well, what are you going to do about it, Mr. Brave-Man-From-Overseas? Are you going to let him get away with it? Are you quitting?"

Jack bent toward her.

" No, I'm not!" he replied guardedly but intensely. " I don't know where you stand in this

situation, Miss Landon, nor do I care particularly right now; and you can tell Kline my answer if you want. Here it is: Rather than permit him to marry Rita Corbin, I'd shoot him dead!"

Dolly Landon silently beckoned him to return to the table with her, betraying no alarm — satisfaction, rather — at his rash statement. One or two of the other guests had already resumed their places at the other end of the festive board, so their action could pass unremarked. But the girl was too shrewd — too fearful, perhaps, of Kline's wrath should he once suspect her intention — to be satisfied with this one precaution. Her laughter trilled out.

"And I thought you were so sensible, Mr. Reese!" she derided. Her voice lowered again after this disarming outburst. She continued, hurriedly: "Don't be a fool! I can help you out in this. You want Miss Corbin ——"

"And whatever made you suppose that?" Jack queried, startled.

Dolly Landon shrugged impatiently.

"Two and two make four, don't they? And I've been watching you all evening. You're a punk actor."

"But what do you expect to gain by assisting me?" he asked. "You have your own interests at stake somehow, I assume."

"I have." Dolly Landon's reply was curt and resentful. "I don't like Miss Corbin. I — I hate her. Bart lied to me about her. Since seeing

her for the first time tonight, I've decided it won't suit me at all to have him marry her — even for a while ——"

"For a while?" Jack's eyes narrowed.

"That's the low down of it, yes," the girl responded coolly. Her semblance of refinement and education dropped from her in her anger. "But that's neither here nor there. I only told you that to prove I'm on the level with you. And if you really want to cross up this business, meet me tomorrow noon at the address I'll slip you before I leave tonight. I'll decide on a safe place meanwhile. I'll give you a straight lead to work on then, and the address of a photographer in town where I wouldn't dare go myself ——" She paused, her eyelids flickering in warning.

Reese nodded, smiling, and turned away casually. But in passing he encountered the intent glance of Barton Kline, questioning, suspicious and sinister. But at that moment a servant intruded between them, apologetically asking the plant manager if he wished to answer an urgent telephone call.

Kline returned shortly to make his excuses for an immediate departure.

"I'm sorry indeed, but it's imperative," he said regretfully. "One of the plant's eastern representatives has just arrived on the Limited from Detroit, confound him. And it looks as though I'm slated for an all-night session with him, if he's to catch the morning train out. And yet some

people say I have an easy job!" He said his good-bys around the table, stopping last beside Rita. He held out his hand to her, and her fingers fluttered uncertainly into his stubby clasp.

"What's the matter, Bart?" some one laughed. "Is it out of fashion to kiss your fiancée good-by? You're among friends, you know!"

The cry was taken up in a bantering chorus, lacking only the voices of Reese and Dolly Landon. Jack looked around the table furiously, then quickly back to Barton Kline. The plant manager was smiling, but his eyes were fastened almost commandingly on Rita, who had shrunk back, her face flaming.

"Well, if it's a dare!" Kline laughed, holding out his arms to the frightened girl. Slowly, like a jungle bird under the hypnotic spell of a serpent, she drew closer to him. His arms reached out eagerly to enfold her.

Jack shoved back his chair preparatory to rising. His fists were clenched, his eyes blazing. But an interruption from another source, scarcely less effective than his intended one, allowed his action to go unnoticed. A glass crashed to the floor. All eyes focused there.

Dolly Landon had fainted.

CHAPTER XIII

Barton Kline, his close-set eyes blinking rapidly as an only indication of any repressed emotion, took charge of the situation brusquely. He gathered the limp form into his arms and quietly suggested to Rita that she lead the way to a bedroom.

"It's nothing to be alarmed about at all," he told the guests. "No need to call a doctor, even. Miss Landon often has these spells. A slight heart disorder, you know. But she'll be herself again in five minutes."

The plant manager returned downstairs almost at once. He was smiling.

"Just as I thought. Miss Landon is able to sit up already. She'll be the life of the party again before supper's over." He glanced at his watch, and waved a hurried farewell. "I'm devilish sorry to have to desert this way, but I'll promise to make amends next time."

But Dolly Landon did not rejoin the supper party. Rita returned to the dining-room alone, shortly after Kline had left, explaining that the ill girl had insisted on being left in the care of a maid only; she wished to rest quietly for a time, but would be down later if she felt able.

The supper proceeded lugubriously. Dolores Landon's illness had dampened the high spirits of

the gathering. And Kline's absence was another cause for general discomfort. Excepting Jack, the guests were the plant manager's friends, not Rita's; and lacking his presence, a sense of constraint quickly developed. Rita did her best to be entertaining, but her somber eyes belied her smile. Only the Maestro Leonardo — he who left Mona Lisa to the world — could have faithfully recorded that paradoxical and poignant expression.

By ones and twos the guests departed. There was no lingering over the demi-tasses; no gathering into little intimate groups to prolong an evening enjoyably spent. It was as if the atmosphere of quiet refinement about the Corbin home, Rita's superior breeding, had suddenly impressed themselves on Barton Kline's friends. At least the subdued manner of their leavetaking conveyed such an impression to Reese.

He was left alone with Rita in the otherwise deserted reception hall. For a long moment they stood staring at one another in silence. Then:

"What in the name of heaven ever made you do this mad thing, Rita?" Characteristically, Jack drove straight at the heart of the question.

"What mad thing?" the girl countered, smiling wearily.

"Engaging yourself to Barton Kline! To a man you can't possibly love, whom you can't even respect. A traitor to his employer, a blackmailer, a thief!"

Rita held up her hand in a pitiful gesture.

"Jack — please don't. Please leave me. Don't ask me to explain. I can't. I won't. You can't help me in any way. And you're making it harder for me — can't you see? I must — I'm going to marry him!"

"You're not!" Jack cried fiercely. "You're not going to marry him, Rita." He grasped her hands and forced her to face him. His voice softened. "You must confide in me. You can't go it all alone, girl. You're in trouble. Kline's holding something over you, I'd be blind if I didn't see that. And I want to help you. You must tell me what it is." His voice hardened again. "Tell me, or I'll go to Kline and beat the truth out of him with my fists!"

Rita was looking up at him. Their eyes met, clashed. Suddenly the girl collapsed against him, the last remnant of her composure gone. She buried her face against his shoulder, sobbing brokenly.

"It's Gordon — my brother!" came the muffled admission. "He's in terrible trouble — threatened with disgrace. It would break my father's heart if he knew!"

"Your father knows nothing at all about Gordon's trouble? Your brother asked you to keep this from him?"

"Dad knows nothing about it. He mustn't know or suspect — ever!" the girl cried. "Gordon drove him up to San Francisco yesterday to attend some sort of a business conference. They'll be back

tomorrow. Before leaving, my brother asked me to warn you about — about spending that money he loaned you. He warned me against Barton Kline, too, but that was all I could get out of him.

"Then — in the afternoon — Barton called on me. He told me the facts about Gordon's — predicament. He was horrible! He threatened my brother with disgrace and imprisonment unless — unless I'd marry him. He demanded that our engagement be announced at once, before Dad and Gordon got back. I had to consent, don't you see?" She drew free from Reese's arms with new determination. "And I'll go through with it, too. It's the only way."

Jack accompanied her into the drawing room, sitting down opposite her on a divan.

"I'm not so sure it's the only way," he said thoughtfully. "Kline is bluffing. I can't tell you how I happen to know, Rita, but I'm positive of it. Kline traded your brother the only evidence he had against him — the only evidence that would stand in court — for my note for ten thousand dollars——"

"He did. He admitted that." Rita shook her head hopelessly. "But you don't know how cunning Barton Kline is. He had that — that evidence photographed before he gave it up to Gordon! He offered to take me to his home and show me the copy. And he insisted that I invite that woman — Miss Landon — as a guest tonight. He wanted to hold her over me as an additional

threat, I presume, in case I weakened in going through with it."

Reese jumped to his feet.

"You must let me have a talk with Miss Landon at once — if her condition permits," he said, purposefully. "She's our last hope, but she can help you, I'm sure. And she wants to. She's already told me that. If I'm not very much mistaken, she's infatuated with Kline. God knows why! But that's her reason."

Jack's thoughts were racing as he followed Rita up the stairway. Dolly Landon knew about the copying of the original hotel register, he theorized. She had spoken to him of a photographer in Tres Arroyos to whom she would direct him. Evidently something of value was to be gained there. She most likely had all the details of Kline's scheme at her finger tips; the plant manager would have told her to assuage her jealous suspicions. Moreover, in planning the meeting for tomorrow, she had appeared most sanguine. Was it too far-fetched to hope that she had some means of access to Kline's private papers? Might she not somehow have discovered the combination to Kline's safe, where he would doubtless keep the incriminating copy?

Reese's theories came to grief here. They butted into a solid wall of fact. Kline, to all appearances, was still unaware of the loss of the motor plans from his safe at the time of his hasty departure from the Corbin home. But the "plant representa-

tive from Detroit" with whom he had gone to consult, must assuredly be the "dummy" inventor who was to take the drawings east for patenting. By now, the plant manager would have discovered the safe robbery. And finding his strong box not as impregnable as he had supposed, his first step would naturally be to remove the evidence against Gordon Corbin to a more secure repository.

Rita knocked gently on the door of the bedroom into which Dolly Landon had been taken. A second maid, stupid enough in appearance, answered the summons.

"Please ask Miss Landon if Mr. Reese may come in to see her for a moment," Rita requested.

The servant looked her surprise.

"Why, don't you know, Miss Rita?" she asked. "Mr. Kline said you did. He came up by the tradesmen's entrance and carried the lady down the back stairs to his machine. He said she wanted to see a doctor at once but didn't wish to alarm the other guests. They went a good half-hour ago."

Rita and Jack went slowly down the stairs. The latter was in a brown study. His last hope had come a cropper. But he did not tell the girl that.

"Don't worry, Rita," he encouraged, as he put on his overcoat. "I won't give up on this until the last man's hung. And Miss Landon gave me a hint or two that I can follow without her help. I think I'll have something encouraging to report to you tomorrow. At the worst, I believe I know how

I can convince Kline of the error of his ways ——"

Rita drew close. A newly awakened fear showed in her troubled eyes.

"You won't do anything desperate, Jack!" she begged. "Promise me that. I won't let you sacrifice yourself ——"

"I won't do anything any other man wouldn't do, who — who ——" He stopped. Rita was very close to him. Her slender fingers were still clenched about his coat lapels, where she had placed them in her intense effort to wring a promise from him that would mean his safety. In her eyes was a dawning understanding of all that he had stopped short of saying. Nor did she draw away from him.

It was a bitter-sweet moment Jack would never forget. He knew now that Dolly Landon, with her penetrating woman's intuition, had been right. He wanted Rita Corbin — wanted her more than all the world. It was no longer enough to worship her at a distance. He wanted her love — wanted to protect her and shield her and fight for her always. But it was not fair to trade on her emotions now, her leaning on his greater strength in an emergency. And he had not the right to ask her to marry a man in his present dubious circumstances.

"I'll be careful," he resumed quietly. "You needn't worry on that score, Rita. And I'll call you up tomorrow to let you know how things are going. Or I'll drop in to see you if my news is especially good. In the meantime, cheerio! as the English

say. We'll have this muddle straightened out in jig time."

In the morning Jack started to follow up the single positive clue Dolly Landon had given him. From it, during the night, he had made several deductions — pieced together with what illuminating information Rita had supplied: Barton Kline had had the hotel register sheet photographed. But, reasoning from Dolly Landon's remark, it seemed probable that Kline had left the duplicating plate with the photographer who had done the work. That was the only solution Jack could find for the chance hint of Kline's accomplice. And such a procedure would be quite in keeping with the plant manager's crafty ways. He would know that if things came to a showdown — if Joel Corbin's fighting spirit were finally enlisted to save his son's reputation — a determined effort would be made to gain possession of the incriminating evidence. So by such an obvious — and therefore unsuspected — precaution, he could keep the whip hand regardless of eventuality.

Consulting a directory, Jack found that there were two established photographers in Tres Arroyos. But he met with signal failure on his visit to the first. In answer to a direct question, he was told pointedly that a customer's commission was never discussed with unauthorized people.

That taught Reese a valuable lesson. In his next attempt, he employed a subterfuge. He took a business letter from his pocket on entering the

dingy premises of Carl Pfeffer, " Expert Photographer," and gave it over to the old German proprietor for inspection.

" Can you make a clear photograph of that for me?" he asked. " Or don't you handle that sort of difficult work?"

Pfeffer squinted at the sheet for an interminable time. Jack's heart dropped when it was returned to him.

" I haf in der pigsher business been for forty years," the German vouchsafed, with cutting dignity. " I am an exbert photographer. I gan maker der duplicate — aber it will cost you five taler. It iss not so easy."

Reese considered dubiously.

" But have you ever done any similar work? I'm in a hurry and it's important. I can't afford to have the work bungled."

Pfeffer dropped his spectacles in his agitation over this insult to his ability.

" Bungled! Carl Pfeffer iss no bungler, young mans!" Furiously he turned on his heel and ducked under the frayed curtain that divided off his " studio " from his living quarters. He flung back into the room brandishing two exposed photographic plates. " There — und there!" he cried pridefully, shoving them to Reese belligerently. " Look at them! Iss that bungling, hey?"

Jack's hands trembled as he held the second of the plates up to the light. Over its surface, he saw quickly, was stenciled a long row of names and

addresses. And near the center, on two succeeding lines, he recognized the same bold chirography in which Gordon Corbin had written the agreement two days before and signed a check for ten thousand dollars!

Without asking permission, Jack stepped out onto the sidewalk. There he held the plate up to the sun as if he wished to study its merits in a better light. But out of the corner of an eye he furtively watched an approaching pedestrian. As the man came even with him, Jack stepped forward — still with his eyes upturned to the negative. The two figures collided heavily. Reese stumbled back, half off his balance. The plate flew from his fingers and crashed down on the cement in irreparable splinters!

It was easier to mollify the German than Jack had anticipated. A fulsome praise of the ruined plate, coupled with cash payment for the new order, completely restored Carl Pfeffer's good humor.

"It iss nothing," he said. "Der customer has der one copy which he ordered. Und he told me to throw away der plate in a month if he came not back. It has alretty one week been. If he comes back, I will hoomer him by dupligating from der copy. But maybeso you should pay me for that, hey?" he suggested keenly.

Jack handed over another five dollars to salve his conscience for the deception, and drove back home. He had been far more successful than he

had dared hope. He had destroyed the duplicating plate; he had discovered that Kline had only a single print from the negative. It would be difficult to obtain that, of course, but not necessarily impossible. There were ways, he reflected grimly, of breaking even the stubborn will of the plant manager.

On this point, he decided to consult with Marcel. He was determined to go it alone in the matter, but the little Apache might have some valuable pointers to offer. It had been so in the past.

He called Dejeans from his work on the motor and took him up to the privacy of his bedroom to explain the situation. But the diminutive Frenchman listened only until he got the gist of the matter. Then, of a sudden, he was darting around the room like a madman. He rumpled his hair and wrung his hands.

"Sacre damn!" he moaned. "Sacre, sacre damn! Ees it zat I am nevair to get even wiz Corbin? Ees it zat I must lose t'irty t'ousand dollairs?" He darted into his room, returning with a smudged envelope, which he slit open with his stiletto. With a magnificent gesture of resignation he handed one of the papers it contained to his partner.

"Ten t'ousand!" he counted dramatically.

Mouth agape, Jack stared at the document in dumfounded wonder. It was the note he had signed for Gordon Corbin's loan! On the back it bore a transfer to Barton Kline.

"Twenty t'ousand more!" Marcel laid down the second paper.

It took but a hasty glance for Jack to realize its import. With a wild cry of elation, he flung his arms around Marcel's shoulders.

"You damned little go-getter, you!" he kept repeating. "You damned little go-getter! How did you ever happen to do it?"

Dejeans explained brazenly, not without pride of a sort. It appeared that he had felt urged to try conclusions with Barton Kline's safe a second time in order to recover the dangerous agreement Jack had signed. He had done this the night following Gordon's visit to Reese. In searching for the note, he had run across the copy of the hotel register sheet. And it had struck him that this offered him an excellent means of bringing to time Gordon Corbin, who had called him a Paris gutter rat. Not to mention the twenty thousand dollars Corbin had bid for it, which could be used to admirable advantage in the promotion of the Reese-Dejeans motor!

"But now — pouf!" he finished, with a sigh of resignation. "It ees for you to decide, Jacques. Zose t'irty t'ousand dollairs — zey are my gift to you!"

CHAPTER XIV

PERHAPS the announcement of the severance of the Corbin-Kline engagement — following the betrothal party, as it did, by a scant twenty-four hours — was news worthy of the space and speculation accorded it by society editors throughout southern California. But to the inhabitants of Tres Arroyos at large, who depended largely on Corbin Motors for their well being, this yielded the palm in interest to the simultaneous announcement of Barton Kline's resignation as plant manager.

To Jack, however, possessed of certain " inside " information which none of those concerned had seen fit to hand on to the gentlemen of the press, a third satisfying development was known—one with an additional happy significance. At last the younger Corbin had asserted the latent manhood within him, and in a positive, convincing manner. Returning home from San Francisco with his father while Jack was explaining to Rita the fortunate turn events had taken during that morning, Gordon had broken in on them already armed with the knowledge of his sister's engagement. He had surmised its motive, and demanded explanations. Reese gave him the truth, with no mincing of words. And the boy, finally alive to the despicable part he had played, promptly took Reese to his father and made full confession to them both, sparing nothing.

It was a painful and pitiful scene to Jack, seeing Joel Corbin's pride in his only son die in a silent agony that was worse than reproach. The old land baron could have forgiven Gordon anything — anything except an admitted cowardice. There seemed no possible way of condoning that.

Then, happily or unhappily, according to the point of view of the various participants in what followed, Barton Kline arrived at that juncture to pay his respects to his betrothed. He was nattily attired in a new spring suit, and bore a florist's box of American Beauty roses — a passing inspiration — to present to the object of his dubious affections. Probably he had not as yet discovered Carl Pfeffer's first "bungle," even had he knowledge of what was missing from his safe. He appeared entirely sure of himself.

Some ten minutes later he was permitted to depart from the Corbin billiard room — where he had accompanied Jack and Gordon not without remonstrance. He departed minus several more or less idle threats, his necktie and one wing of his collar, a few stray bits of cuticle about the face, and his position as the Corbin plant's chief executive; not to mention his expectation of marrying Rita in good time! He retained most of his new suit, all of the American Beauty roses, and under his right eye what in fistic circles is sometimes designated as a "mouse." His sedan might have been observed driving rather rapidly from the porte-cochère.

Gordon Corbin, in almost equal disrepair, lay on the billiard table, grinning and gasping for breath, while his father patched him up with court plaster and styptic collodion. Old Joel, sinfully pleased, disguised a reborn pride in the boy as best he could under a gruff criticism of Gordon's unpolished — if expeditious — pugilistic style.

Reese tiptoed from the room not to disturb the freshly realized ties which bound father and son together once more. He bade a hurried good-by to Rita, deprecating her gratitude almost brusquely. He was sorrowfully aware that this further cause for intimacy between them must actually become a reason for increased restraint on his part. And, despite Rita's hurt expression, he told himself as he drove away that he had done the right thing. By helping as best he could in the emergency, he had no more than repaid Rita and her father for their many kindnesses to him. And only the success of the Reese-Dejeans motor — not through making capital of the Corbins' gratitude — could ever permit him to tell Rita what his whole being, excepting his sturdy independence, demanded of him.

Jack returned to the making of the motor with a clear conscience. He had mailed his note for ten thousand dollars back to the plant manager in a typewriter-addressed envelope. That was a moral obligation, he felt, inasmuch as Gordon had told him that Kline had reimbursed him the amount of the loan. As for Kline's accusation that Reese had

robbed his safe — delivered in the Corbin billiard room — Jack stood in no fear of recourse being taken of the law. And he had noted that there had been no accompanying mention of what valuables were stolen. That transaction, along with Gordon's blundering attempt on the same night, would reflect equally on Kline now that there were several corroborative witnesses to the ex-plant manager's illegal methods.

The Reese-Dejeans Special was completed in an amazingly short time — considering the character of the workmanship that went into it. Wherever possible the motor parts were hand-tooled. No labor was spared to make the most insignificant and unimportant unit a thing of strength and perfection. And the inventions Jack and Marcel had worked so long to perfect tremendously increased the efficiency of the car, an efficiency new to the automotive world. Engineers had experimented in vain to contrive a successful non-friction bearing; the Reese-Dejeans had that. Textbooks were unanimous in declaring it impossible to fuse copper and iron in a commercial way; the Reese-Dejeans had a copper cylinder jacket which gave radiation efficiency equaling or bettering the standard set by water-cooled systems. Running twenty-four hours steadily at high speed in an initial test in the workshop, the motor was not unduly heated.

Jack had already sent in his entry for the Girard Cup Race. This event, run under the sanction of the A. A. A., was to be of five hundred miles

duration, and was open to any driver capable of qualifying on the Capri Track at ninety miles an hour. The Special's piston displacement was under the maximum allowed, and the gear ratio was sufficient to hurl it along at well over a hundred miles an hour — if the motor held such propelling power.

Remained only to prove that to be a fact, to prove that and to get the " feel " of the car through driving it. For racing cars have idiosyncrasies no less individual than ships; in their ranks they have likewise their " killers," their hard-luck " hoodoos," and their unresponsive steering gears. So, after limbering up the motor for several days in the workshop, Jack and Dejeans drove the car out to the deserted highway early one morning to try it out.

For miles the smooth concrete extended up the coast in an unbroken straightaway; an ideal testing ground. In the gray dawn there were none to watch and no motorists to be endangered. Jack gradually increased the flow of gasoline. The racer, resplendent in a fresh finish of maroon paint and new tires, purred into a greater speed without a vibration to mark the change. Marcel held a stop watch ready and kept on the lookout for the starting point of a two-mile dash, previously measured off.

" Ready!" he shrilled.

Like a thing alive, the racer picked up momentum. Under Jack's guidance it held the road

perfectly, literally seeming to float along. In a minute and thirty seconds by the watch the finish marker was passed. Marcel made a rapid computation, and shook his head disappointedly.

"Not so good," he said. "Only eighty miles an hour."

Reese laughed exultantly.

"I didn't dare to let it out this first time. It may be a little stiff yet. And we have plenty of time to burn up our rubber before we go north for the race. But she'll roll with the best of 'em, Marcel. She's a traveling fool! With ordinary luck, we'll show a clean pair of heels to the field at the Capri Track. I'd stake my life on it."

The tests continued morning after morning. It was only natural that some slight defects should develop; but none of these reflected on the sterling quality of the motor. The spring suspension was modified slightly. The oiling system was improved in one or two minor details to safeguard the extreme demands of track racing. And the Reese-Dejeans Special, thus bettered, continued to course over the two-mile dash in the gray light of dawn with ever-increasing speed. Marcel's stop watch indicated a speed of one hundred and ten miles per hour on the last of a week's trials. And still the motor held a reserve power far in excess of competitive requirements. A pace of two miles a minute, steadily maintained, would take the checkered flag from the fleetest car ever seen on a track, Jack told Dejeans.

"But we'll let it out tomorrow," he said. "I'm just kid enough to be curious how it feels to travel over the ground at two miles a minute or better. And it'll be our last chance before we drive up to the track."

It was Reese's desire to be on hand at the Capri Speedway in advance of the other entrants, if possible. He wanted to gain confidence and experience on the banked mile and a quarter bowl well before even the qualifying laps had to be run. That was simple prudence, even though his invaluable training as pilot of a combat plane had taught him the ultimate of speed and the last word in quick-witted maneuvering.

That afternoon Jack went to the Tres Arroyos Bank and withdrew the last of his capital in the form of a cashier's check. He intended to deposit it again in a San Francisco bank when he went north and draw more handily from there to defray the expense of a pit crew and race-replacements.

As he left the bank, he encountered Barton Kline. He would have preferred to avoid the man, but the other was patently waiting for him; and to have ignored the suave salutation might have been construed as arising from fear or a sense of guilt. Inasmuch as Jack felt neither, he stopped and waited for the other to come up.

"I understand you've entered a car in the Girard Cup Race, Reese," Kline began briskly, with no hint of remaining animosity because of their recent differences. "Is that true?"

"It is." Jack spoke constrainedly. "You know where you stand in my estimation, I presume, Kline. So I don't suppose you're questioning me out of idle curiosity."

"You're a very astute young man."

"Well?"

Barton Kline put another question for answer: "Are you seriously counting on finishing in the money?"

"Certainly. I'd be a fool to enter if I didn't think I had a chance of placing."

"First place?"

"Possibly."

"Would you like to bet on your chances?"

"I'm not a gambler." Jack started to turn away.

"Wait!" Kline persisted. "I'm going to offer you a proposition that you can't refuse if you have an ounce of sporting blood in you. I'll bet you even money, any amount, that you won't place at all in the first five to cross the finish line!"

"I don't care to consider it, thanks."

"Afraid, eh?" Kline jeered, his manner undergoing an abrupt change. "Not even game to back your American Rolls-Royce on a five to one shot!"

Reese's face flooded with color at the taunt. His jaw bulged out. Kline's mocking smile had always irritated him and aroused his resentment. Now it infuriated him. Ever impulsive, it was impossible for his pugnacious nature to refuse a direct challenge from one whom he had good reason to

regard as his most vindictive enemy. Moreover, this challenge belittled the capability of the Reese-Dejeans motor and questioned his faith in it. He stepped closer, so purposefully that Kline retreated a pace.

"Listen, Kline!" he said tensely, "I know you've got something up your sleeve. You must have. You've never seen my car perform to my knowledge; you don't know what it's capable of. And you're the kind that wouldn't play penny-ante without a marked deck. But I don't give a damn!

"Here's a proposition for *your* sporting blood," he plunged on recklessly. "Gordon Corbin has told me that he has transferred to you the note for the ten thousand dollars I borrowed of him. I have that money in the bank ready to pay you on demand. I'm ready to settle now. But if you want to sign an agreement giving me until one week after the race to meet the note, I'll wager you the ten thousand, even money, that I *do* place in the first five. If I win, you give me the note to destroy. If I lose, you'll probably get the Reese-Dejeans bearing. I won't have a cent in the world to pay you otherwise. That's how far I'm game to back my motor."

"Done!" Kline agreed.

Before posting the bet with a stakeholder, however, Jack 'phoned Marcel to get his consent to the gamble. But, as he had anticipated, the little Frenchman was blasphemously eager to share the risk.

"Sacre damn, yes!" Dejeans cried. "It ees ze suckair money. And, voila! ze patents are in your name. Put zem all up if zis feesh would t'row away ze money!"

But Jack was too prudent for that. The small voice of reason was already telling him that he was playing another man's game in accepting the bet at all. Kline, he knew, was no gambler by nature; he played only pat hands. Hence there must be something behind this "sporting proposition," eminently fair and aboveboard though it was to all outward appearance. But it was too late to back out; the agreement was made. And Jack knew that he would never have reneged, after going so far, even were he gambling against a more gracious opponent than Barton Kline. So the money was put up. And Reese returned home with the disquieting memory of Kline's parting smile — mocking and triumphant — to keep him awake during the long hours of the night.

At four o'clock — an hour before dawn — the alarm clock startled him bolt upright in his bed. With a sheepish grin for his unusual case of "nerves," he shut off the bell and began to dress. On the cot against the opposite wall of the workshop Marcel was already sleepily rolling a cigarette. Together now they shared the night watch over the completed racer. And this was their customary hour of arising during the testing of the motor; it insured them the safety of a deserted highway on which to make their trials.

Marcel touched a match to his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"Me," he yawned, "I am glad zis ees ze last time we must get up so early. Zose damn clock makes me seeck like ze army reveille!"

But no sleepiness could long endure under the exhilarating spell that came with the sweeping motion of the racer well under way. The air had a bite and healthy tang to it, beating on the faces of the partners crouched down behind the cowl. Dawn was just breaking as they reached the highway. The landward horizon was a soft pastel of crimson and amethyst. And the concrete roadway lay into the distance, gray, deserted, and perfectly smooth, straight as an arrow.

"Get ready!" Marcel warned, as he caught sight of the signboard, well ahead, that was the first marker for the sprint. In a second, it seemed, they were abreast of it.

"Go!"

From a running start at comparatively low speed — a mile a minute — the racer accelerated marvelously. With a drumming roar, with flames shooting from the side ports, it skimmed the highway like a streak of crimson light. Faster, and still faster. Hillside, trees, electrical poles — all merged into a fantastic blur. The wind, screaming, was shunted aside.

Jack threw out the clutch and let the racer coast on to an easy stop.

"How long?" he asked.

Marcel peered down at the stop watch. He looked again.

"Fifty-seven seconds," he answered in an awed whisper. "Bettair zan two miles a minute!"

"Some!" Jack grinned elatedly. "And she wasn't all the way out at that." He threw the gears into reverse, and started to turn. But before he could get well under way, a motorcyclist turned into the highway from a side road, intercepting them. The rider held up his hand for them to stop. A star showed on his leather jacket. He spoke in a taciturn growl, handing over a slip of paper already made out.

"Pinched for speedin'. And don't ramble over thirty goin' back to town. I'll be followin' you the whole way."

Jack started to remonstrate, but was cut short:

"Tell it to the judge, brother, at ten o'clock. I'm too sleepy to understand." A mile further along a second motorcyclist joined the first. They compared stop watches as they rode along abreast the racer. Something like admiration showed for an instant on the taciturn one's face. "It's a wonder this concrete didn't roll up and follow you at a hundred and thirty per," he called to Reese. "But Gawd help you when the judge gets hold of you; no one else can!"

And Reese found that he stood in need of aid when his case was called to the bar of justice. Old Judge Ennis was a self-constituted evil jinn of speeders, known for his harsh sentences through-

out southern California; moreover, he was a notorious "bawler-out" of his victims.

"Reese," he addressed Jack in pronouncing sentence, "you have pleaded guilty to driving in excess of two miles a minute over a public highway. I have been informed by a prominent citizen who reported your flagrant case that this is a customary practice of yours. If so, you are an idiot — more dangerous to the commonwealth than a maniac! I should like to sentence you like a common felon. Unfortunately, I cannot; you have injured no one." After this somewhat ambiguous statement, His Honor pronounced the judgment of the court: "Fifteen days in jail or complete suspension of your driving privilege for six months!"

"But I must drive in the Girard Cup Race two weeks from now!" Jack protested.

"You should have thought of that before," Judge Ennis replied acidly. "The penalties of the law aren't prescribed for the comfort of violators. The sentence stands. Choose your alternative."

Marcel sprang from his seat far back in the courtroom.

"Sacre damn!" he cried, "it ees zat you do not onderstand ——"

"Order!" barked the judge.

But Marcel, beside himself with anxiety and excitement, continued to pour forth a torrent of words — invectives, when he was again ordered to silence.

Judge Ennis nodded to the bailiff and pointed his trembling gavel at the irate Frenchman.

"Ten days for contempt!" he thundered. "No alternative!"

Again, it appeared, the calculating brain of Barton Kline had scored disastrously against the partners. For there was no doubt in the mind of either of them as to the identity of the "prominent citizen" who had informed Judge Ennis of their early morning tests.

CHAPTER XV

JACK accepted his misfortune with the best grace he could muster. There was no denying the seriousness of the predicament he was in, however. And Marcel's temporary incarceration made the situation even more desperate. Naturally Reese had instantly decided to choose the penalty of losing all driving privilege for six months as the lesser evil of the alternatives offered him. And in the same moment he had decided that Dejeans should drive the Special in the Girard Race in his stead. But the impulsive Frenchman had made that impossible the next second by foolishly contesting the decision of Judge Ennis.

As matters stood, therefore, the Reese-Dejeans would have to be piloted by some other if it were to compete in the race only a little over a fortnight distant. Dejeans would be out of jail before that time and could still ride as mechanician; but it would be tempting Providence for him to drive after only three or four days to familiarize himself with the Capri Track. In addition, Jack understood that the qualifying lap would have to be run several days in advance of the race.

Reese left the courtroom, after a hurried farewell to the disconsolate Marcel, with a tentative plan of action already made. He hired a trust-

worthy watchman to stand guard over the racer during his absence, and caught a noon auto stage for Los Angeles. There, he telephoned an official of the Beverly Hills Speedway with whom he was slightly acquainted. Luck was with him. The other was able to put him immediately in touch with an unengaged racing driver of ability and experience — one, however, who had won no spectacular success.

"Muldoon is a good heady pilot," the official said, "and his record is A-one. He's a square shooter. But he's never had a really first-class car under him. He's been a whipper-in with the Lansing team until this season. But he quit them in a huff when they wouldn't give him a decent boat. Look him up anyhow. He may be just the man you want."

Reese found that the Los Angeles address given him by the other was that of a garage. And he found big Jimmy Muldoon working there for mechanic's wages. The black-haired Irishman, muscled like a bull, crawled out of an overhauling pit in response to Jack's question. But his ready smile left him when Reese explained the nature of his business.

"No, sir! I'm through with the racin' game," Muldoon said positively. "I've been the goat for years on every track from Sheepshead Bay to Cotati, and I'm through shovin' hacks acrost the finish after the stands are empty. I never won a race. I never had a chance to. And if I ever go

back, I'm goin' to be damn' well sure I've got a heap beneath me that won't hit even the high spots. Jimmy Muldoon's through and finished as an also-ran. So there you are. Did you ever hear of any special winnin' from a classy field like will turn out for the Girard Race?"

"I suppose you're familiar with the plan of the Capri Track, aren't you?" Jack countered.

"I am," said Muldoon, "and I'm here to tell you, friend, that it's the best laid out for its size in the world, bar none. The Girard is goin' to see some records fall."

"Could you do a hundred and thirty on the straightaways?" Reese asked tentatively.

"Can a nigger shoot craps! I'll say I could — if there's a car that could stand the grind."

"I'd pilot my car myself," Jack said, "only I was arrested for speeding this morning, and my driving privilege was suspended for six months—"

"Sorry," Muldoon interrupted, "but —"

"I was doing a hundred and thirty an hour on the highway," Reese let drop casually, "and wasn't wide open at that."

"A hundred and th ——!" Muldoon stared incredulously. "On the level? Or are you kidding me?"

"On the level. You'll find it on record in Judge Ennis's court. I don't know how you feel about it, but the old boy seemed to think that was going some!"

Big Jimmy Muldoon glanced at the clock hooked

onto a spike in the wall. It was on the stroke of five.

"Hell!" he sighed, unhooking his overalls. "This makes the third job I've quit this month. I just can't seem to be satisfied. But what's the dif? Some fools are made, and some are born racing drivers. That's me all over, Mabel. I'm hired!"

The eager Irishman returned to Tres Arroyos with Reese that same night. Jack had become entirely convinced of the other's honesty, aside from the recommendations and spotless record he had. Furthermore, Muldoon knew the financial ins and outs of the racing game thoroughly. And as his pay, aside from expenses, was to be half of whatever prize money he made, he quickly discovered several sources which might be made to yield an additional profit. He promised to get bonus contracts from every company that had equipment on the Reese-Dejeans — from spark plugs and tires to gasoline and oil. A win would mean several thousand dollars from those sources for advertising privileges, he said. Then there was the lap money — twenty-five dollars for each lap a driver led the field — another ten thousand to shoot at.

Jack saw that if victory fell to the Reese-Dejeans, even with the profit divided, he would have ample funds to build the first demonstration car. And the wager with Kline would net enough to establish a showroom in Los Angeles or San Francisco where

the machine could be exhibited to possible investors. On paper it all looked as good as his. The Reese-Dejeans, he was confident, could ramble with the best of them; and Muldoon, an able man, was out to make a name for himself.

But Jack was beginning to realize the tremendous mistake he had made in gambling with Barton Kline. Practically, by so doing, he had put a premium on Kline's sinister schemings. And the arrest that morning was only the first of the crippling attempts that might be expected before the race. The Geneva Corporation's field man would bend every effort toward keeping the Reese-Dejeans from making a favorable showing. But it was impossible to forecast from what direction the next blow would fall, so Jack had to be content with putting Muldoon on his guard.

The big Irishman refused to become alarmed.

"These racing crews are the best bunch of clean sports in the world," he said. "It's a religion with them, almost, to play the game square. I'll hand pick my pit team; there'll be no dirty work from the inside, mark that. And nobody I don't know ain't right'll get within shootin' distance of this Darby of ours. All I ask is fair racin' luck, and we'll show the cockeyed world!"

Reese devoutly hoped that such would be the case. But it was with a vague presentiment of hovering disaster that he watched Muldoon start the racer on the long drive up to the Capri Track early the following morning. At the last moment, he had

decided not to go along. The Special was in perfect shape. Muldoon was trustworthy and competent. And the Irishman, with his big chance at last accorded him, had enough at stake to assure his utmost vigilance in safeguarding the machine from harm. Considering all that, Jack felt that he could employ the time before the race to better advantage than in loafing about the speedway. Too, when near the slender, low-hung racer, there was the constant hungering urge to ignore Judge Ennis's harsh sentence — to sit behind the motor he had perfected and drive faster and still faster to the siren spell of its powerful, pulsing rhythm.

But that was out of the question. For six months even the services of the rattletrap flivver must be dispensed with. Judge Ennis had indeed chosen a heartbreaking means of impressing the legal limits of speed on one unhappy violator! And had that "prominent citizen," Barton Kline, chanced to pass Mother McGuire's driveway at the moment the maroon speedster glided from it, he might have found a perverted satisfaction in viewing the dejected watcher who stood staring after it, anxious and brooding — like one whose eyes and heart follow a ship going hull down on the horizon.

As a matter of plain truth, there was another reason to prohibit Reese's going to the Capri Track at this time. He was short of money. By remaining at Mother McGuire's, he could live half as cheaply as at some San Francisco hotel. And the saving of forty or fifty dollars was of prime

necessity now. Muldoon's living expenses for two weeks would entirely consume the slender surplus that had been set aside for emergency use. Even as it was, Jack feared that he would have to dispose of some of his cherished personal effects to make the trip a day or two before the race.

But he was spared this sacrifice through Rita's kindness. Making a remiss call on her late in the week, she invited him to motor up with the Corbins and share their reservations in the grandstand. Her father and Gordon added their insistence, so Jack finally capitulated. He had intended to become one of the pit team for the Reese-Dejeans, but a little thought showed him the foolishness of this. The pit crew was limited to five men by track regulations, and he saw the advantage of leaving this work to men specially skilled in it. Where seconds counted, it was better to make his personal desires subservient to greater efficiency.

Big Jimmy Muldoon wrote that his service crew was the most expert on the speedway and absolutely to be trusted. And his daily reports to Reese, telegraphed the last week, glowed with optimism and faith in the Special. He had qualified at ninety-six miles an hour, but under wraps, so he said, to keep other pilots from getting a line on his speed. Remaining a dark horse until the last moment had many advantages. The motor was behaving perfectly, too; the car handled splendidly; and with Dejeans now on hand to manage the final tuning-up, it was "a lead-pipe cinch we

can't land worse than second or third." Such was the last heartening message Jack received before leaving Tres Arroyos with the Corbins the day before the race.

The whole world, it seemed, was headed for the Capri Track on the glorious spring day that was to make or mar the fortunes of the partners. Driving down the peninsula from San Francisco, where they had spent the night at the Palace Hotel, the Corbin party found the highway choked with a solid stream of southbound machines. The Girard Cup Race, while not offering as great a purse as some, was *the* recognized classic of the California racing season. And in the eyes of all motordom a victory here was as signal an achievement as winning the checkered flag in the great Indianapolis annual.

Jack threw aside all anxiety and gave himself up to the pleasure of Rita's company. Marcel had telephoned from the track early that morning, reporting all well with the Special; and the little Frenchman was enthusiastic over Muldoon's rare driving ability. So victory or defeat rested on the knees of the gods; worry could change the result not one iota; and this day with Rita — the last one ever, Jack had decided, if Muldoon and the Reese-Dejeans failed irretrievably — must be made to yield all happiness.

Owing to the unexampled turnout of motorists to attend the opening of the Capri Track, with consequent trouble in parking, the Corbin party did not reach their box until the last moment. They

had barely time to settle themselves and look over the various entrants in the race before the last signal bomb exploded. Broadside to them in perfect rank and file, glistened the flamboyant colors of twenty-odd roaring, unmuffled racing monsters. White and red, yellow, black or checkered, with drivers and mechanicians laughing, stern or indifferent, they waited motionless but vibrant, ready for the grueling contest that would mean injury or death or bitter disappointment to the many who rode; victory and the rewards of victory to the chosen few.

Jack touched Rita's arm lightly.

"It's a great sight, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Which is yours?"

"Number 12," he said softly, pride catching at his throat. "That's our car, Rita — the maroon one — next to the outer rail." Below them they saw the shining, low-hung Special, with Big Jimmy Muldoon, hooded and goggled, lounging over the wheel. Beside the pilot fidgeted the gnomelike, diminutive form, dwarfed by comparison, that must be Marcel.

"It's beautiful, Jack — perfect!" the girl said earnestly. "And you'll win, I know, because — well, because you deserve to. You've always played fair; you've fought your way to this against tremendous odds." An almost imperceptible shudder passed over her tense body. "But it seems terrible that men must risk their lives just — just to provide a spectacle like this."

"You're wrong there, Rita," Reese replied quietly. "It's endurance contests such as this that have perfected the motor car. It's the acid test. The fit survive, as in everything, and the weak fall by the wayside. Today will decide, for instance, just how good the Reese-Dejeans bearing is. It will decide whether our air-cooled motor — the first ever entered in such an event — can stand comparison from every angle with the water-cooled type. If we win, we've written a new page in automobile history. If we go bust, so to speak, — well, somebody may write a funny poem and immortalize us like Darius Green and his flying machine!"

Rita's laughing answer was cut short by the starting of the pace lap. In squads of four, like a well-drilled platoon, the racers rolled into motion behind the pace car. Once around the elliptical bowl. Then the pace car, well in advance, darted off the track. On the bridge, the starter's flag poised, fell. A tumultuous, eager cheer welled up from the stands. With a thundering roar, the first rank of four lunged across the starting line; the second, third and fourth followed, off to a perfect start. In a dizzying riot of color and sound, the Girard Cup Race was under way!

But Jack had eyes only for the maroon Special — for Number 12, with Big Jimmy Muldoon already striving for an advantage before the first turn was reached. A flame-red Mercedes was leading. The remaining three of the first rank were

still neck and neck — a Sunbeam, a black Italian car, and a Peugot. The second rank was beginning to string out. The third was closing in on the heels of it. And the Reese-Dejeans, hurtling forward like an unleashed greyhound, was already nosing past these along the outer rail!

Jimmy Muldoon, the pilot who had never won, who had never until now had his chance, was at last making his long-delayed bid for fame. At the second turn, he had headed all but the leading four. On the straightaway, fronting the grandstand, he glided by the Italian, the famous Torrano, amid wild acclaim.

Grim and reckless driving — with death an ever-present menace. Inches and split-seconds, sometimes, and the most artful control, changed foolhardy risks into consummate skill, earning the breathless applause of the spectators.

And the Reese-Dejeans was rolling. Pistons beating, thundering along, it rocketed onward in stubborn pursuit of the three leaders. Close in back swept Torrano, the mad Italian, who had won last year's Grand Prix. Behind him strung the field, with many of the world's best pilots still far from beaten.

Reese, gripping the edges of his seat, watched enthralled. He saw the Sunbeam fall back into third place behind the Peugot. He saw the Peugot head the flame-red Mercedes on the far turn. And he saw the Reese-Dejeans pass the Sunbeam, closely trailed by the black Italian car!

Positions were changing rapidly on the scoreboard. The first lap went to the Mercedes; the second to the Peugot. Jimmy Muldoon took the third. And the fourth and the fifth! Only the scoreboard could tell positions now; places had lost meaning in simply following the flashing, pounding streaks that circled endlessly past the stands. But the Reese-Dejeans and Muldoon, dark horses both, were beginning to draw the amazed attention of the concourse. An air-cooled motor, an obscure pilot; a freak special and a maniac Irishman! It was little less than effrontery for them to lead the van of the world's best cars. Yet the sympathies of the spectators went out to the unknowns. They were cheered to an echo on every record-smashing circuit of the ten successive laps they led.

But Torrano was creeping up. With shining eyes, Jack watched Muldoon hold the lead over the Italian by the sheerest skill and daring. A wearing duel developed for supremacy. The Reese-Dejeans never faltered. Neither did the black Italian car. Speed and more speed. Faster and still faster. The eyes blurred in following the dizzying sweep of the speed-hungry monsters.

But the big Irishman began to take fewer chances. He had tried out his car at its best and found it not wanting. He was content to settle down shortly to a pace of one hundred and twenty miles an hour and let the law of averages get in its deadly work. After all, while not exactly com-

parable to the hare and tortoise, it is a steadily maintained speed that wins endurance contests, not brilliant, sporadic flashes.

Torrano, on the other hand, continued to accept risks that left the crowd momentarily dumb. And he got away with them, miraculously, for a time. On the thirteenth lap he wrested the lead from Muldoon and held it continuously for ten miles. But the Irishman dogged his heels, and went to first place again after that distance.

The race settled down to the grueling contest of endurance — man and machinery — it actually was. Cars began to drop out here and there. A Spanish car limped from the track. One of Muldoon's old team mates on the Lansing crew quit with carburetor trouble. The Peugot threw a tire on a turn and narrowly escaped wrecking the machines bunched behind it.

At the end of one hundred laps the scoreboard showed that the flame-red Mercedes had taken five, the Peugot one, and the Sunbeam four. Torrano, the popular favorite to win, and Muldoon had nearly equally divided the remaining ninety. And the Reese-Dejeans was running first once more after dropping a close lead to the Italian for several laps because of a rear-tire blowout! It had not been to the pits once because of engine trouble.

Jack turned pridefully to Joel Corbin.

"Well, what do you think of the Reese-Dejeans now?" he laughed. "Do you still maintain that

it hasn't a chance to wedge out a place in the automobile industry?"

The old manufacturing magnate lowered his field glass and rubbed his tired eyes.

"You've almost convinced me, my boy," he smiled. "And if that wild Irishman of yours doesn't break his neck before the finish, I'm sold on the merits of your car, by Godfrey! If the Reese-Dejeans finishes at better than a hundred an hour — let alone placing in the prize money — I'll see that you get backing of the right sort, if I have to go out and beg it. Your patents for air-cooling alone, if successful, will be worth ——"

He was cut short by a scream from Rita. The surrounding stands seemed to be rising in a living mass. Jack's heart seemed to stop beating as he looked from his superior height over the heads of intervening watchers. Number 12, the maroon Reese-Dejeans Special, out of control, was careening across the track at the turn. Torrano, trailing tight behind, swerved instantly, and with a consummate bit of driving steadied his machine and raced on — unquestionably supreme now — with undiminished speed.

Number 12 crashed drunkenly off the track, rolled over, with Muldoon and Dejeans crumpled in the wreckage beneath!

By showing his credentials, Jack was admitted to the field hospital. But even before he had plowed a way through the crowd, he had heard the sickening news: The driver of 12 was dead —

killed instantly. The little French mechanician, miraculously — possibly because of his small size — had escaped with only a broken leg and possible internal injuries.

After Reese had seen Marcel, cursing and weeping alternately — an augury for rapid recovery — comfortably ensconced in a hospital room with the broken leg set in splints, he returned to the Capri Track. The Girard Cup Race was long over. Torrano, the mad Italian, had been victorious, winning the ten-thousand-dollar prize and other thousands of lap money. Three spectators had been injured by a thrown tire late in the race. All established records for the distance had fallen. Muldoon was dead. And Number 12 was a hopeless wreck, good for little else than junk.

Jack poked about the ruins of the Special, a twisted mass of metal and wood, upside down. Suddenly he bent forward alertly. His face went hard and set. Marcel had told him that the accident had been caused by a broken radius rod; he had come to verify this for a fact. A portion of the rod was missing, twisted off. The other part remained. Half across the face it showed a raw fracture — such as might be expected from crystallization. But the other half of the diameter was gummed over with a greasy substance. Scraping this away, Jack saw the clean cut of a hack-saw blade!

Big Jimmy Muldoon had not lost his "big chance" and his life because of the Special's

weakness, then. Jack was not to lose success because the Reese-Dejeans motor was a failure. Somehow Muldoon had relaxed his vigilance or trusted some one unworthy of his faith; and Marcel had missed the abrasion because of the clever filling-in that hid it. The radius rod had been weakened deliberately, in cold blood, to bring ruin to the partners.

And Reese, standing with clenched fists and blazing eyes over the wreckage — the wreckage of his fondest dreams, too — could think of only one who could profit from this ruin. And that one was Barton Kline, with his mocking smile, who had wagered ten thousand dollars so confidently, practically against the invaluable bearing patent, that the Reese-Dejeans Special would not even place in the first five to finish!

CHAPTER XVI

THREE hopeless days of inactivity — with each slow minute implacably shortening the week of grace within which Barton Kline must be paid his pound of flesh. And during those days of waiting for Marcel to recover sufficiently to return to Tres Arroyos, Jack found no ray of hope to lighten the cloud of depression that had settled about him. It was an unusual condition for him. He was optimistic by nature. But it was inevitable that a reaction should set in after the titanic labors of the past months — labors so nearly rewarded by a spectacular success, yet which had ended in worse than failure.

As for his financial problems, Jack refused to consider any solution that could not be obtained on a purely business basis. He might have secured the money to pay off Kline's note by merely hinting of his need to Joel Corbin. But Reese's fine sense of pride balked at that. The old land baron had refused him positively once on the merits of the project; and Jack was not one to put a price on the services, however great, he had rendered the Corbin family. He denied himself assistance from this source with the full knowledge that it was his last and only chance of saving the Reese-Dejeans bearing.

Concerning the less tangible problem of bringing

Kline to justice for the ruin he had caused, Jack was still undecided as to the proper course to pursue. As ever, the Geneva man's tracks were well covered; there was no clue to follow that might link him definitely with the plot that had cost Jimmy Muldoon's life. But Jack had no intention of giving up until this score was settled. One of the small cortège that followed the unlucky Irishman to his last resting place, he vowed grimly that the courageous driver should be ultimately avenged. Kline would overreach himself again sooner or later, he reflected. Meanwhile a silent and patient watchfulness would avail more than an announcement of the discovery of the weakened radius rod. Believing their dastardly act undetected, Kline and his accomplices would sooner relax their caution and perhaps let slip a valuable clue.

On the morning following Muldoon's funeral, Dejeans was permitted to leave the hospital. Hobbling along on a pair of crutches, still wan and weak from the shock of his recent experience, he yet maintained a sort of cynical cheerfulness. But his bright little eyes were somber beneath their masking smile, for he knew that Jack's answering smile was as hollow as his own — that his partner was sick at heart and fearful of the future.

After buying railroad tickets to Tres Arroyos, the partners had left something less than two hundred dollars in cash between them. And that had come as a dispensation from good fortune. Mul-

doon had won approximately a thousand dollars in lap money before the wreck. And since the dead driver was without dependents, Jack had felt no compunction in taking a half share of the prize money, according to agreement, to cover pressing needs. Incidental expenses and Marcel's hospital bill had taken toll of over half of it. The balance was little enough to keep Marcel until he would be well enough to get some sort of employment.

Mother McGuire was the first to give proof of her undeviating loyalty to her "lads" on their return to Tres Arroyos. She emphatically refused to accept the money which Jack offered her in advance payment for board and lodging.

"Kape it; ye'll need it. And not another wurd out o' ye!" she silenced his objection to her generosity. "Shure, ain't I knowin' ye'll pay me as soon as ye git on yer feet ag'in? 'Tis like puttin' it in the bank, it is." And after giving Jack the scant mail that had accumulated during his absence, she bustled off to cook up something "delikit" for Marcel.

But before going through his mail, Jack laid away the bills Mrs. McGuire had spurned between the leaves of a hefty old volume in the bookcase. A few more weeks would likely see him broke, he told himself; but at least the worthy Irishwoman should not lose what she could ill afford through her kindly intended offer. There would be no

unpaid obligations to form an ignoble monument to the memory of the Reese-Dejeans motor.

There was only one letter of importance in the pile of correspondence. It was from Barton Kline — a formal demand for the payment of the note for ten thousand dollars three days hence; or, failing that, calling for the surrender of the rights to the non-friction bearing.

Jack crumpled the slip of paper fiercely and flung it into the grate. Moody-eyed, he watched it burst into flame among the glowing embers and flake away to ashes. His hopes and ambitions had been like that, he reflected bitterly. They had blazed brilliantly on his toil and that of his faithful partner, had lighted the path of dreams, only to crumble to ashes and leave him groping and despairing at the crucial moment.

He shrugged. Like many another he had aimed too high. His arrow had failed to reach its appointed mark because he had winged it with impossible hopes instead of practical appreciation of his limitations. But, no! His hands gripped the arms of his chair and a red haze seemed to rise between him and the fire which held his troubled gaze. He had not aimed too high. He had not lost because of visionary expectations. The motor was a success, even if he had been robbed of opportunity to prove it to a skeptical world; and Rita Corbin had not been unattainable. But for Barton Kline and his devilish machinations, his uphill fight

for happiness and success might easily have been won.

Barton Kline! A feeling of active, burning hatred toward the Geneva spy swept over him, overwhelmed him — an unreasoning blood lust that urged him to come to grips physically, to destroy the man who had brought him ruin. He began to pace the room, past wrongs flooding into his memory to add fuel to a consuming hatred. Conflicting emotions warred within him. Reason told him that a revenge of violence would bring a further avalanche of disaster thundering down upon him; but other voices, armed with their own irrefutable logic, urged him onward to insane but satisfying reprisal.

Had he not fought above Flanders fields, sent men whose faces he had never seen crashing earthward to their death, all in the broad name of Humanity? Had he not risked all in many a desperate air duel inspired by the first principle of democracy, that the weak were not the ordained prey of the ruthless strong? Why, then, would it be wrong to take the life of Barton Kline, who preyed likewise on the weak backed by the overwhelming resources of the Geneva Corporation? And what difference would it really make to him if people, with their contradictory definitions, now gave a just retribution the name of murder? There was nothing left to live for, nothing left to lose —

Mother McGuire poked her head through the doorway, her eyes wide with concern.

"Wurra, wurra! an' what's ailin' ye, lad?" she asked, affrighted. "Here I've called ye three times to supper, an' ye kape awalkin' up an' down the floor wid yer face blank an' yer eyes apoppin' like a bog witch had cast her black spell over ye. Come, now," she coaxed, "an' eat a bite. 'Tis a b'iled dinner I've made up special fer ye wid lots of turnips, the way ye like it."

Somehow Jack got through the meal, choking down a creditable amount and even complimenting the Irishwoman in a way that disarmed her fears. But he excused himself as quickly as possible and hurried upstairs to his room. There he took Massey's revolver from a drawer, examined it carefully to assure himself that it was in perfect working order, and shoved it into his hip pocket. He penned a brief note to Marcel and another to Rita, addressed them and laid them conspicuously on his desk. But on second thought he tore open the one to the girl and burned it in his ash tray. The newspapers might get hold of it, he decided; and that would mean unpleasant notoriety for Rita. Better far to leave no explanation to her, no farewell, than to brand her as the confidante of a fugitive murderer!

He tried to make his way from the house unobserved, but on the first-floor landing he was suddenly confronted by the flurried Mrs. McGuire.

"A foine gintleman to see ye, lad!" she announced breathlessly. "One o' thim rich magnates, I think. Shure, he's got dimonts on that 'ud

make yer eyes blink. And the most genteel voice — just like a actor!" As an afterthought she surrendered the engraved business card tightly pinched between her fingers.

Jack, half of a mind to escape the untimely visitor by leaving through the back door, glanced at the neat oblong of engraved cardboard with arrested attention. Its legend was intriguing:

"HOMER V. DAVENPORT. INVESTMENT BROKER"

"I'll see him," Reese decided on an impulse.

"Praise be, an' maybe he wants to loan ye money to build yer car wid!" Mother McGuire enthused.

"More likely he wants to sell me an oil well!" Jack said gloomily. "But it won't take me long to find out."

Homer V. Davenport, however, proved even more remarkable and interesting than the Irishwoman had predicted. He was a large man, of impressive girth, with a pink and white complexion and eyes as guileless as those of an infant. But he soon enough exhibited an alert business acumen and the canny instinct of a showman for "what the public wants."

A short conversation with him revealed that his business of "Investment Broker" was, reduced to the simplest form, nothing more or less than that of a promoter. He had attended the Girard Race, had witnessed there the short but spectacular

ascendency of the Reese-Dejeans; and his shrewd brain had at once remarked its unusual adaptability to exploitation. Further inquiry among track men who were more or less familiar with the unique construction of the partners' motor had, he said, convinced him of its potential earning power. So he had secured Reese's address from the Capri Track Secretary and dropped off to see him on his way to Los Angeles.

"My business is selling stock, promoting new industries — for a consideration," he came to the point of his long, free-flowing discourse. "I understand that you've tried to get financial backing — and have failed. I can get it for you — if you're willing to pay my price."

"How?" Reese queried.

The promoter waved his arm in a large gesture.

"How? The power of the press, of course — advertising. I can sell the public anything from a patent toothpick to a white elephant ——"

"Just a moment," Jack interposed. "I'd rather not finance my motor than do so on exaggerated claims. It must go on its merits, or not at all. That would have to be understood."

"Of course," Davenport agreed heartily. "Experience has taught me that it pays to stay strictly by the truth in advertising — within the law, so to speak. I can give you every assurance on that point."

Jack was convinced. He tried to disguise his

mounting hope under an appearance of indifference, but this was a sorry failure.

"And what is your price?" he asked in a dry, eager voice.

Homer V. Davenport's guileless eyes narrowed calculatingly.

"How much money do you need to start your plant, and how much stock do you want to sell?" he countered.

"I need five hundred thousand," Reese said hesitantly; "and I want to keep control." Inwardly he braced himself for a sharp rebuff. But it was not forthcoming.

"Then you'll have to be capitalized for about a million," the promoter computed coolly. "That'll leave you a sixty-five per cent control — a big, safe margin." He went on to explain. The sale of one fourth of the capital stock would realize half the amount required to build the factory. The other half could be borrowed from some bank easily, with a blanket mortgage on factory and equipment representing the combined amounts for security.

"But what becomes of the other ten per cent of stock?" Reese inquired, puzzled.

"That's my split for financing you," Davenport explained. "And that's dirt cheap, considering that I'll have to pay all promotion expenses and get the permit from the Railroad Commission to issue the stock. State law allows ten per cent for that purpose, so it must be all right. And at best

I'll be lucky if I get clear with fifty thousand for myself."

Perforce, Jack accepted Davenport's offer. More readily when, in the ensuing discussion, the promoter agreed to meet Barton Kline's note at once. However, that amount was to be later refunded through sale of some of the partners' personal stock. And the same agreement was to hold for the sum Davenport was to advance for the building of a demonstration car. The promoter traded more shrewdly when he discovered the imperative nature of Reese's obligation to Barton Kline.

None the less, Jack felt that Fortune had been most kind to him. Davenport did not represent a type of man that he ordinarily trusted or cared to engage in business with. But any straw was to be grasped at in this darkest moment, and he had to admit that the promoter had followed a perfectly logical course. He had seen a possible profit to be made from the Reese-Dejeans and had acted accordingly. And he made no denial of the fact that his interest was purely mercenary.

"I keep moving," he said breezily by way of farewell, after coming to an agreement with the partners late that night. "I work fast. Advertising does it. In the next few days you'll see things begin to bust in the Los Angeles papers. Biggest come-on colony in the world there. In two months you'll have your working capital all paid in. Meanwhile, get busy on that demonstration car. I'll have to have it in three weeks at the

latest. I'll make arrangements tomorrow for the Tres Arroyos Bank to honor your drafts for materials and to have them take up that Kline note at once." He jumped into his brilliant red touring car with an agility that belied his appearance of corpulency, and waved a genial farewell with one bejeweled hand. "Speed's our motto, remember. So long. I'm off in a cloud of dust!"

And speed was the partners' watchword in truth during the ensuing weeks. At last — for the first time since Jack had projected plans for the motor — everything seemed to conspire toward the consummation of his ambitions. He shuddered when he recalled the crime he had so recently been on the verge of committing. And while he still cherished the undying determination to bring Kline to justice for the murder of Muldoon, he was too busy and generally pleased with developments to brood over the personal wrongs he had suffered. Kline's note was paid. Joel Corbin had agreed to approve a loan from the Tres Arroyos Bank equaling the sum realized from stock sales. Working two shifts, the demonstration car was rapidly nearing completion.

It went to Los Angeles under its own power in record time — nineteen days. Preceded by a brass band and a drum corps, it rolled sedately up Spring Street to the exhibition room awaiting it, its motor functioning noiselessly and to perfection, its distinguished lines the cynosure of every eye on the crowded thoroughfare.

The stock-selling campaign opened with a bang.

Homer V. Davenport was a past master in the art of arousing public interest. Every paper flaunted full-page ads that day — and the next and next. Famous movie actors and actresses were posed at the wheel of " America's Ace — the Reese-Dejeans Wondercar." And it was rumored widely that many of these film luminaries were taking substantial blocks of the stock which was " being offered in very limited quantity to investors with vision." And the sale of stock did progress with all reasonable speed.

All would have been well had Davenport been content to confine himself to facts in his campaign. But in order to hasten his individual " clean-up," he resorted to the most extravagant and impossible claims to intrigue investors. When sales began to lag a little, he resorted to the more questionable devices of the press agent. Strictly speaking, no announcement was made that was untrue or illegal. The investor was left to draw his own conclusions from the roseate picturing of " proposed buildings," " contemplated extensions," and " anticipated profits."

When the first of these misguiding advertisements came to his notice, Jack went at once to Los Angeles and had it out with the promoter. Homer V. Davenport was quite insulted by the flat accusation that he had been resorting to fraud to promote sales.

" I've guaranteed nothing at all. I've made no positive assertions," he pointed out. " So why

get on your high horse? We're strictly within the law."

"Regardless of that, we're through with that sort of advertising. As I told you at the start, if the Reese-Dejeans can't be put across on its merits we'll give it up."

"But there's fifty thousand dollars worth of stock to be floated yet," Davenport objected. "It can't be disposed of in any other way. Wildcat oil stocks are catching most of the money."

"We'll close the campaign then," Reese said decisively.

"Very well." Davenport nodded curtly. "But remember, that fifty thousand is the balance due me for promoting your company. That's my contract. Pay me that out of the treasury and I'm willing enough to call it quits."

Jack smiled grimly.

"I'll give it to you in stock, Davenport. 'We anticipate a net profit of twenty per centum during the first year!'" he quoted from the latest ad. "You couldn't ask for better returns than that, could you?"

"I demand cash!" the promoter insisted.

Imperturbably Reese made out the order for the stock and tossed it onto the desk.

"Take it or leave it," he said. "It's double what you've earned honestly; but I'll stand by my agreement if you'll meet me half way. Otherwise, my lawyer is looking up some data concerning past operations of yours which may come in handy

if you decide to go to court," he fired a random shot as he turned confidently away. "I keep moving, Davenport. So long. I'm off in a cloud of dust!"

But from the doorway he glanced back to see the promoter carefully placing the stock order in a hefty, gold-edged wallet. Evidently — and as later events proved — Homer V. Davenport had accepted the proffered compromise.

CHAPTER XVII

THE following months fled all too rapidly for Jack. As president and manager of the company, a thousand and one tasks devolved upon him daily. Snap decisions had to be made and made correctly. Equipment had to be contracted for expeditiously and yet with a fine sense of discrimination. Soon enough the young president of Reese-Dejeans Motors realized the grave responsibility attached to the spending of a half-million dollars.

In innumerable instances he was indebted to the sage advice of Joel Corbin. The old land baron saved him from costly blunders time and again. In single cases Jack's judgment was almost always sound; but he lacked the broad, cohesive knowledge coming of experience, which the other possessed. And Corbin was genuinely interested in Reese's success, aside from the fact that the new concern owed the bank in which he was chief stockholder a matter of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That amount was secured by a mortgage on the modern, reinforced-concrete factory building which was slowly arising on the Tres Arroyos water front.

On Corbin's advice, Jack had purchased this advantageous site for a very nominal sum — considering that it was already equipped with a large frame warehouse. This building had been one of

Corbin Motors' original supply sheds; but an unexampled growth had necessitated a shifting and enlarging of storage quarters years ago. But the structure had been kept in excellent repair, and contained considerably more than space enough for the immediate storage needs of the Reese-Dejeans Company.

It was Jack's intention to manufacture only the motor at first. The chassis, for the time being, could be bought of one of the large body plants specializing in that work. This served a two-fold purpose. It saved a considerable initial outlay for machinery and floor space, and it permitted, of consequence, nearly the entire liquid assets of the company to go into the motor factory. Until the Reese-Dejeans got well established, a portion of the roomy warehouse — remodeled at moderate expense — was to serve as the assembling shop.

The factory, in spite of Jack's best efforts, could not be made ready for production before early in December. He chafed at the unavoidable delay; but the intervening months — after all bids had been let — were in no wise idle ones for the partners. Among other things, they were looking to the future in regard to the next Girard Race. It would be run again just when Reese-Dejeans output should be well under way, in the early spring. A victory would tremendously boost first sales. It would make comparatively easy the problem of finding retail distributors.

In this latter connection, Jack had already re-

ceived a promising offer — an offer the more pleasing because it had been unsolicited. But as is usual in such cases, the offer had a string to it. C. J. Gilpin, perhaps the biggest distributor of expensive foreign cars in America, had written for specifications of the new motor. And he had been so favorably impressed that he had offered to take over wholesale distribution east of the Mississippi, guaranteeing a minimum disposal of one hundred cars per month — provided only that the Reese-Dejeans won the next Girard Cup Race! And as Joel Corbin vouched for Gilpin's responsibility, Jack determined to bend every effort toward a victory.

Thus, in a somewhat different way, a win on the Capri Track the coming season would mean even more than it had on the last disastrous attempt. It would mean the sale of one hundred or more expensive cars a month — a turnover alone sufficient to establish the Reese-Dejeans with a moderate profit from the outset; leaving out of consideration the exploitation of the large and wealthy western territory.

It would mean, too, that Jack could at last speak his inmost heart to Rita. She had been often in his company of late, and always in his thoughts. And he found an increasing admiration for her in the penetrating insight with which she grasped and solved the business problems he sometimes confided to her. For several years now she had personally managed the considerable fortune left

her by her mother, and she was a keen business woman. To Jack, whose talents were more for production than finance, this unusual ability of Rita's approached the miraculous. It set her apart, and at the same time drew her closer; for she could take a helpful and intelligent part in discussions which would have been Greek to the ordinary girl. But Reese continued studiously to guard their close friendship from taking a more serious trend. Victory had been snatched from him before, he knew; and he was determined as ever to win a recognized success before asking the girl he loved to share his fortunes.

Considering the favorable trend of events in general, this repression of Jack's might be open to question — but for one sinister circumstance. Homer V. Davenport's five per cent of stock had been transferred on the company's books to Barton Kline! This in itself had no particular significance; a minority of the stock had been offered at public sale without restrictions. Moreover, Reese and Marcel had, and intended to keep, a controlling interest; and the plant's policy and operation were theirs to command. But through his holding, Kline had availed himself of the right of free access to the factory, to the company's books, and to the "inside" information this naturally entailed.

He knew, for instance, that certain last-minute additions to the factory had consumed the capital laid aside for initial operating expenses. He knew that the partners had met this eventuality by bor-

rowing liberally on their personal stock, turning the amount realized into the company's treasury on a potentially unsecured loan. And he knew that Jack intended to enter two Reese-Dejeans racing cars in the Girard Race, one to be piloted by himself, the other by the best professional driver that money could employ.

Jack made no great effort to disguise these facts; sooner or later they would have become generally known at all events. But it was disquieting to him in a way to feel that he was under constant surveillance. Such patient shadowing must have an important underlying motive. The continued stay in Tres Arroyos of a man of Kline's ability, ostensibly idling, could have but one purpose — a purpose unguessed but surely inimical to the Reese-Dejeans interests. And the fifty thousand dollars Kline had invested in stock, doubtless as agent of the Geneva Corporation, would be a trifling loss to that wealthy concern if it could be used somehow as an opening wedge to gain possession of the partners' patents.

But at this point Reese was always reassured by the knowledge of his and Marcel's controlling interest. As long as they did not relinquish that, as long as the new plant was even moderately successful, Kline could do little harm. Or so Jack confidently anticipated. He, as well as the more astute head of Corbin Motors, failed to perceive as yet the signs of the gathering storm which was to shake the Corbin interests as well as the part-

ners' less well established venture to their very foundations.

Reese's confidence was further increased by a secret which only he and Marcel shared. While the factory was going up, they quietly developed a new and important improvement to the motor. Commercially, it was of inconsiderable value, for its use was restricted to the super-speed of track racing. But there — particularly in the forthcoming Girard Race, on which so much would depend — its use would immeasurably increase the chances of victory. Roughly, the complicated invention was a sort of supercharger — a system of forced induction to the carburetor remarkably increasing acceleration and speed. And with two Reese-Dejeans racers to be equipped with this device, with one of them to be piloted, if tentative arrangements held, by the renowned Torrano himself, it was small wonder that Jack was sanguine of the future.

The Reese-Dejeans factory began production shortly before Christmas — without fuss or furbelows. At eight o'clock of a Monday morning the power was turned on, machinery began to whir, men bent to their appointed work; and a new infant had been born into the automotive industry — an infant in the sense of age, but one which must be self-supporting from the start. Only time could tell whether it was destined to stand the hard buffeting of the industrial world which must come before maturity.

One favorable aspect was the substantial mass

of orders already waiting to be filled — enough to consume a one-shift output well on to the time of the Girard race. Reese's wide-awake sales manager had months ago disposed of distributing territory throughout the West to good advantage. Agents were already telegraphing in for preference in first deliveries of display cars.

Remembering, however, Joel Corbin's half-jesting promise of a year before, Jack himself drove the first completed Reese-Dejeans stock car to the Tres Arroyos Bank. The machine was a maroon-colored brougham, with the beautiful, clean lines ordinarily only seen in a custom-built product. And beneath the satin-smooth hood purred a motor capable of one hundred miles an hour, yet one which was soft and docile in traffic. Reese had every reason to feel proud of his achievement, and he was — inordinately so. But it was with a rapidly beating heart that he asked to be admitted to Corbin's private office. The old manufacturer could be counted on to give a straightforward statement of his first impression of the car. He would render no false praise. And his shrewd appraisal, favorable or adverse, might be taken as the voice of the automobile world.

With a feeling verging on panic, Jack forced a casual greeting.

"I've brought around that car you ordered from me last year, Mr. Corbin," he smiled. "It's outside at the curb if you've time to look it over. It's — it's the first one to be completed."

Joel Corbin sprang to his feet. One keen glance had sufficed to reveal to him all the emotions Reese was trying so desperately to disguise: pride, hope, eagerness — and uncertainty.

"Always have time to look at something new and interesting, Reese," he laughed, "especially when my money's going into it. You've called my bluff, boy, by Godfrey you have! Lead me to it, and I'll pay the damages without a whimper!"

With all the curiosity and intense interest of a youngster, Joel Corbin examined the chassis and fittings of the Reese-Dejeans. His inspection was thorough and silent, so thorough that Jack's fears began to gain the ascendancy. Finally the old manufacturer stood off for a last critical survey.

"Designed something after the Isotta-Fraschini, isn't it?" he commented keenly.

"A little," Jack said; "but we've tried to work out something less formal than the Continental cars in general — something that a man can drive himself without offending the proprieties and the chauffeurs' union."

But Corbin was again absorbed completely — delving under the hood, inspecting the purring motor with a practiced eye that missed no detail. He returned to Reese's side dusting his fingers with a handkerchief.

"A good job, a mighty good job," he rendered his verdict, while Jack hung on the words eagerly. "I've never seen a better stock-model design. And the motor is A-one. Even with the limitations of

quantity production, I hardly see where it could be improved on."

"Then you think," Reese asked, "that we'll be able to put it across after all?"

Joel Corbin shook his head.

"I don't know," he admitted frankly. "If it was anybody but you, Reese, I'd be very much inclined to doubt it. You've done wonders so far, but you're still operating on a shoestring, so to speak. You owe considerable money. The demand for your product isn't firmly established as yet. I don't want to seem gloomy or discouraging, but actually I believe you have a bigger fight ahead of you than any you've won." His eyes clouded with more than a trace of doubt. "Automobile stocks generally are unstable right now — and for no good reason. The demand for motors has never been better; the country is prosperous. But there's something in the wind — something I can't exactly put my finger on as yet — but it smells trouble in store for some one."

"But Reese-Dejeans stock is being quoted right along at not far below the par value of fifty — or was the last time I looked," Jack pointed out.

"Closed at forty-one last night," Corbin said briefly. "And that's a good strong price for a new issue of the kind."

"Well, then, what is there for me to worry about?" Jack puzzled. "Our stock's strong, you say, and you like the car. And you already know what a boom we'll have if we win the Girard Race

and get Mr. Gilpin's contract for a hundred cars a month ——"

"C. J. Gilpin is playing safe," Corbin cut in. "His business is to sell cars, not to make them. And he knows that he can sell the Reese-Dejeans if it makes a big name for itself — which, if you'll pardon my saying so, is still problematical. But neither Gilpin nor the Lord Almighty can or will help you if your stock tumbles to twenty-five before you're well out of debt.

"I'm not referring to the mortgage on your plant; that's secured and can ride. But your personal loan on your stock to finance production isn't so substantially secured; it's backed only by the market value of your stock. If that goes down, the value of your security diminishes correspondingly. At twenty-five you'd be up against it. At that figure, the Los Angeles banks from whom you borrowed would be justified — compelled, I might say — to throw your stock on the open market to protect themselves. And perhaps the Geneva Corporation wouldn't snap it up, eh — especially if they happened to be manipulating the market with that very purpose in view! Do you get the point?"

Jack frowned in bewilderment.

"I get an inkling here and there," he said, "but all this high finance leaves me high and dry. I don't understand it — or how to fight it. What would you suggest?"

"I'd suggest that you make the daily stock reports your Bible for the next few months. And

if your stock starts any unusual and rapid fluctuation, get busy and bolster it up as best you can. Fight! Get some one you trust to advise you of ways and means — some one familiar with the stock game."

"Can you recommend such a one offhand?" Reese queried anxiously.

"Yes; there are dozens who could handle it. You could yourself, easily, if you had the time to study it out. But if you get worried, call me up, and I'll try to put you in touch with some one reliable." Joel Corbin chuckled dryly. "I don't want you to think I'm a born calamity howler, Reese. Nothing at all may come of all this palaver of mine. But it's just as well to keep your weather eye out; put your trust in God, but keep your powder dry, as some one or other said." He grasped Jack's arm and piloted him toward the entrance of the bank. "Now come along into my office, and I'll write you out a check for this new purchase of mine. You're a lifesaver in a way. I've been racking my brain for over a week to think of something unusual I could give Rita for her birthday."

Reese held back.

"Mr. Corbin, just a moment — please. I — that is, my partner and I have talked it over and — well, you've been mighty kind to us. You've backed us up with a big loan, and I've taken up your valuable time asking advice until I'm ashamed." He paused; then blurted out: "We

can never repay you, but we're everlastingly grateful. The car is yours, Mr. Corbin."

The old manufacturer looked his incredulity.

"You mean that you're trying to give me this — this expensive plaything?"

"We do, yes — with our gratitude and thanks — if you'll accept it. It isn't much, considering, but — I guess you understand."

Joel Corbin did understand. He understood the magnificent gesture of youth's giving, folly though it was. For an instant he had been on the verge of emphatic refusal. It was ridiculous that he, a millionaire time and again over, should accept this ill-afforded gift; equally ridiculous that the partners should feel so deeply indebted for the services he had gladly rendered them.

But, too, Corbin was touched by the impulse of true friendship which lay behind Reese's clumsily worded presentation. It was the first car. And the old manufacturer remembered well the deep emotions that had stirred within him when the first Corbin came completed from the assembly line. He remembered that — and the financial battle that had followed shortly after, leaving him triumphant at last but with new lines in his seamed face and gray hair at his temples. He smiled involuntarily in retrospect. He had won that fight against odds that would appal him now; he had won because odds had had no significance for him then, because in his ignorance he had employed the unexpected and audacious tactics which always confuse

and confute the cumbersome systems of the strong.

He faced Jack abruptly, smiling and holding out his hand.

"Thanks, Reese," he said feelingly. "And thank your partner, Dejeans, for me too, please. You two have done something for me today that will remain one of my cherished memories as long as I live. I won't forget."

Jack's face lit up. He clasped the older man's hand firmly, made a hurried excuse, and hastened off down the street. From the other's long silence he had anticipated a disappointing refusal. But now he wanted no thanks. The gift, sacrifice though it represented, expressed only a small measure of his gratitude.

Joel Corbin, from the sandstone steps of the Tres Arroyos Bank, watched the sturdy, alert figure swing from sight around a corner. His keen, probing eyes had become suddenly wistful and tired. Youth! What did it know of what awaited around the corner — or care? It gave generously, fought bravely, win or lose. But what could it lose half so valuable as the long span of years that lay before it?

The old millionaire returned slowly to his office. On an impulse he took up the 'phone and put a long-distance call through to a Los Angeles stock broker who was to be trusted.

"Joel Corbin speaking," he rasped, when the connection was made. "Let me know at once, please, if Reese-Dejeans stock begins to look un-

stable. . . . No, I won't be selling, but I want to keep closely in touch. . . . Yes, thanks; that's all." He hooked down the receiver with a grunt of satisfaction. With fingers tented, he sat back staring into space, his seamed face tranquil with the decision he had reached.

But Reese was never to know what a powerful ally had determined to aid him if need arose. For in the partners' darkest hour, Joel Corbin was to be likewise meeting his own desperate needs with all of his shaken resources.

CHAPTER XVIII

CORBIN had indeed read aright the signs of a gathering tempest. With a sixth sense akin to that of a sailor, he had, as he said, smelt trouble. But he could not know that the powers behind the storm were aiming to sweep him into the vortex along with certain others. Moreover, during several following weeks the market exhibited a slight upward trend that was reassuring. Reese-Dejeans stock hovered around forty-one and a half, with little trading, while Corbin Motors continued active at a few points over a par of one hundred.

It was the lull before the storm, actually. The Geneva Corporation, entrenched behind a huge cash reserve secretly accumulated, waited only for word from Barton Kline to begin the assault. That word came when Joel Corbin was suddenly taken to his bed with a severe attack of influenza. Geneva Motors struck instantly.

Meanwhile, during the month or more elapsing between the presentation of the first Reese-Dejeans car to Corbin and the beginning of the raid by Geneva, Jack was swamped with the routine work such as is required to make smooth-running every new enterprise. Incompetents, shirkers and malcontents had to be weeded ruthlessly from the first hastily assembled crew. And this process extended even into the executive and sales divisions. An

employee went if he failed to show adequate results.

Then there was the delicate matter of eliminating waste motion in production, of keying and interlocking the various departments to the highest pitch of efficiency. Certain machinery proved inadequate; crews were modified or enlarged; various steps in assembling were transposed to good advantage. At this sort of task, Reese had few peers. He understood production; he understood men. The factory, therefore, was soon permeated with the maximum of efficiency, yet maintaining withal that invaluable and elusive quality of contentment and enthusiasm which was inspired by Jack's happy personality.

In no sense had he become the self-important young capitalist blinded by a half-success. The company's neatly appointed main office was in a remodeled corner of the big warehouse; but Reese's " private " office remained where it had been during the rush of construction — a roughly partitioned cubby-hole in the factory itself. A second-hand desk, a telephone, a couple of chairs and a filing cabinet comprised the main furnishings. And here in the din and beat of whirring lathes, of drill presses and drop forges, he was at home; the noise and orderly confusion of it all had become a part of his life. And it was here that Barton Kline was forced to seek him out for a memorable interview that prefaced only by hours the unleashing of Geneva Motors' raid of destruction.

That very morning Marcel and a trusted assistant had set out for the Capri Track, driving the two Reese-Dejeans racers which were shortly to compete in the next Girard Cup Race. Torrano, the crack Italian pilot, was already in San Francisco, waiting. Jack intended to go north the next day to act as Torrano's team mate.

Almost a year had rolled around since the tragic death of Big Jimmy Muldoon. The pulses of motordom were again quickening with the anticipatory thrill which only the hotly contested cup classic could arouse. But most of last year's spectators had long since forgotten the name of the dead driver who had momentarily fed their jaded, excitement-hungry appetites. His memory remained only as an impersonal "thrill" for which a stiff price had been paid in the purchase of seat reservations.

Not so with Reese. Indefatigably he had continued the search for evidence that would bring retribution upon those who had robbed Muldoon of his chance. Though the expense was prohibitive, as soon as he could at all afford it Jack had employed a private detective agency to keep him informed of the movements of Muldoon's pit crew. Four of the members had lost nothing through this scrutiny; the fifth recently had been commissioned to drive a Perris "one-man" eight — a new Geneva product — during the present racing season! A promising lead upon which Jack built much hope for important developments. And

added to that was the interesting report that Massey had barely escaped capture in Los Angeles the week before. A hot trail pointed northward. The neat fabric of Barton Kline's weaving was at last beginning to show a flaw, an unsecured thread, here and there.

But Kline, if he had any inkling of all this, exhibited no whit of uneasiness when he came to the factory to present a last-minute ultimatum to Reese. His customary *savoir faire* was much in evidence, his close-set hazel eyes blinked genially, and he had every appearance of a man well pleased with the world in general. He was. In fact, the business which brought him to see Reese was just the sort of thing he relished. If Jack surrendered on the terms to be set forth, it would be a crushing humiliation to remember a lifetime; if he stood gamely by his guns, the Geneva Corporation was prepared to ruin him without compunction. Kline stood to profit equally either way.

He entered the dingy office, cast a patronizing glance about, spat the tip of a cigar into a corner, and clenched the weed unlighted between his teeth. Jack finished filing a number of papers. Then he straightened up, facing about toward the Geneva man.

"Well, what can I do for you, Kline?" he asked, glancing at the battered alarm clock ticking loudly above his desk. "Please be brief. I have an important business appointment in five minutes."

Barton Kline smiled heavily as he drew up a

chair, dusted it with a dab of his handkerchief, and seated himself. He took his own time, bending forward at length with his pudgy hands supported on his knees.

"Reese," he began, "I don't believe it will be to your advantage to hurry me. My business with you is probably as important as any you'll transact for some time — quite some time."

Jack settled back in his chair with a cool grin.

"You may be right; life is fleeting, they say. So let's get down to cases."

"Exactly," Kline approved. "I suppose you know, to begin with, that I am entirely familiar with the financial status of this company. I know its assets and liabilities to a penny. I also know yours personally to within a very few hundred dollars.'

"Kind of you to take such an interest," Jack murmured.

"I know also," the other continued impassively, "that a well-directed bear attack on your stock could reduce you and your partner individually to bankruptcy in a fortnight or less. Probably less. You've borrowed liberally on your personal stock, and you won't be able to cover if the market takes a sharp slump ——"

"I'm watching all that," Jack cut in airily. "And there's really nothing to worry about for the present. Reese-Dejeans stock has held steady at forty or thereabout for over two months now. But thanks for advising me."

Barton Kline's fist smacked forcibly into his cupped palm.

"I'm not advising you. I'm warning you. I'm here to offer you a flat price to turn over your controlling interest immediately. Refuse if you want, but if you do you won't get clear with any more than the clothes on your back!" His teeth bared in a sinister sort of smile. "I've got you where I want you at last, Reese. It's take or break for you! And don't imagine that you'll get any backing from old man Corbin. As far as you're concerned, his teeth are pulled. Corbin Motors will be well on the toboggan by the time the stock exchange closes this afternoon; and the old man will have to do some stiff scratching to keep from being snowed under before the month is out!"

Jack apparently disregarded this. He laughed softly.

"And what do I save from the wreck if I accept your terms?"

"Fifty thousand dollars — no more, no less. But more than you could reasonably expect considering the hole you're in."

"That's one-tenth what it's worth now," Jack calculated quietly. "One-twentieth its value in another year if we win the Girard Race. But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why be so generous when you've got me cornered as you say? You'd much rather strip me of everything I own, Kline. You hate me. You

always have. You've robbed me and cheated me and tricked me time and again! So why not finish the job up true to form? Why not be consistent instead of playing the Good Samaritan at the last by offering me ten cents on the dollar?"

"I'm talking business, not Sunday-school texts," Kline growled. "The men whose interests I represent are ready to pay you a fair amount as an inducement to step aside at once, of your own free will. Or they're prepared to clean you out if necessary. But they can use their capital to good advantage in other quarters right now if you're ready to be reasonable. That's the reason for my offer." He laughed harshly. "No sentiment attached to it at all, you see!"

"Yes, I see!" Jack flamed. "I see that you're offering me a bribe of fifty thousand dollars to stand aside so that Geneva Motors can concentrate its attack on my friend, Joel Corbin. You've let the cat out of the bag, Kline; I'm not quite a fool — or an ingrate, for that matter. And you haven't got enough money to buy me off. I wouldn't lay down to you if you offered me par for every share I own. And if you imagine you can pick up my plant here for a song, you're welcome to try. But I'll see you in hell before I'll quit!"

"You'll see yourself back in a suit of greasy overalls in a month if you don't, you young fool!" Kline barked.

"And I may see you parading a suit of stripes

up at San Quentin Prison before then, you sneaking crook!" Jack countered hotly, advancing menacingly. "Now you get out; get out and stay out!"

Kline sprang from his chair. For a moment he stood his ground in the face of the other's minatory advance. Then choking off a response at the beginning, he departed with such dignity as a wholly prudent haste would permit.

Slamming the door, Jack reached for the telephone.

"Four-O-four," he called the number of the Tres Arroyos Bank. "Emergency call!"

But Joel Corbin was not at his office. The old manufacturer had gone home the previous morning with a sudden attack of influenza. He would be confined to his bed for several days, the bank cashier explained; but he might possibly be reached at his residence if the matter were urgent.

There came a knock on the office door as Jack was ringing the Corbin home.

"Come in, come in!" he called with a sharpness unusual for him. "I haven't time to waste!"

The door opened. Rita stood hesitant in the entrance, a glint of amusement in her eyes. Her simple serge suit, cut after the mannish mode in vogue, accentuated by contrast the sheer feminine loveliness that was hers.

"Yes, sir." She nodded a demure greeting. "Is this the president's office?"

Reese hooked down the receiver and quickly relinquished his place at the desk.

"This is it," he laughed, amused by her pose. "And a thousand pardons, Rita; I'm all up in the air right now. Sit down, won't you? How is your father? I was just trying to get him on the 'phone."

The girl's face sobered.

"He's like a caged lion," she confessed. "He won't admit he's ill, he won't stay in bed; and heaven only knows what he'll do if this stock raid on Corbin Motors becomes the tooth and nail fight he anticipates."

"He's right," Jack said. "Barton Kline as much as admitted to me a few moments ago that Geneva Motors was out for your father's scalp — and mine too, as a side issue. That's why I was calling your home now — to warn your father and to ask him to put me in touch with a stock expert immediately. He told me over a month ago that he could find me such a man, and he warned me at the same time to keep close watch on market quotations. But he seems to have a more efficient source of information than mine." His brows drew together with mystification. "I looked at yesterday's closing figures in the newspaper, and both Corbin Motors and our own issue seemed steady enough. And the stock exchange has been open less than an hour this morning. So I don't see how he could know already what's in the wind."

"Corbin Motors has dropped from one hundred and one to ninety-seven this morning. Selling

orders have been flooding in for nearly four hours — on the New York Exchange," was Rita's illuminating explanation. "Eastern time is earlier than ours, you know." She delved into her purse and handed Reese a letter. "Dad didn't forget that promise he made you. He received a long-distance call from a Los Angeles stock broker a few minutes ago regarding your stock; and he immediately hunted up a — a person whom he felt could be trusted to give you honest and — perhaps helpful advice." Her cheeks flushed crimson. "But — but you mustn't feel at all obliged to employ the one this letter suggests if she — if that person isn't entirely satisfactory to you."

Puzzled by Rita's evident confusion, Jack excused himself and tore open the envelope enclosing a penciled note in Joel Corbin's angular, decisive script. His puzzled frown was replaced by a smile of understanding as he read the opening sentences:

"*My dear Reese:*

"The bearer of this note is personally known to me to be of unimpeachable character. For over two years she has successfully managed considerable investments of her own, mainly stocks; and I confidently believe that she can give you all necessary advice and assistance in this present emergency.

"And it is an emergency. Two hundred of your shares are offered this morning in Los Angeles at 38, fifty more at 37½. An unnatural drop. At 35 I would suggest that you start small purchases to protect the price — particularly to keep your numerous small stock-

holders in line until you can hit back. If you have not made arrangements elsewhere already, Harmsworth & Co. in Los Angeles would be a reliable firm to handle the brokerage end of your campaign. I have spoken of you to them this morning, explaining the situation as best I could over the telephone.

"If these confounded doctors let up on me, I'll hope to advise with you personally in a day or so — or as soon as some slight business difficulties of my own permit. Meanwhile, however, feel entirely free to call on me if you need further help.

"Sincerely and hastily,

"JOEL CORBIN.

"P. S. The bearer is an extremely temperamental and positive young woman, used to having her own way. Trust you can make the necessary allowances in this respect if you see fit to employ her!"

Reese looked up with a broad smile.

"You're hired on your own terms, Rita," he said. "I'm surely grateful for your coming to my rescue this way. But you'll have to take the lead. Frankly, this stock juggling is something I'm green as grass about."

And the girl did take the lead, efficiently and with confidence. She at once vetoed Jack's suggestion that she make her headquarters in the main office.

"It's comfortable here; and I don't mind the noise," she said. "And it might be bad for the plant morale to have the office force overhear telephone discussions and possibly spread rumors — even if unintentionally. I'm going to call Harmsworth & Co. first and ask them to 'phone in a

market report every half hour. We'll need that to keep posted by."

Reese waited beside her, before leaving to attend to some necessary plant affairs, while she held a lengthy long-distance conversation with the stock brokers. Her face was grave when she finished.

"The bottom hasn't dropped out already, has it?" Jack queried with attempted gayety.

"Not quite that bad," Rita replied quietly. "But another two hundred shares has gone on the market at thirty-six and three-quarters."

CHAPTER XIX

THE following day saw the opening of the battle in earnest. Public interest attended particularly the conflict of the Titans — Geneva Motors and its subsidiaries massed on the one side; Joel Corbin and the major stockholders in Corbin Motors ranged in opposition. The Eastern concern, backed by certain Wall Street interests, was generally agreed upon as the ultimate winner. But not before a bitter, long-drawn-out struggle. For Joel Corbin had the confidence and support of influential California bankers, and his shrewdness and fighting qualities had been demonstrated to good advantage many times before. His first strategic move was to cut the price of the Corbin standard "six" — one of the chief competitive thorns in Geneva's side — one hundred dollars. When attacked, it was not the old manufacturer's way to retreat; he carried the battle to the enemy!

Dwarfed by comparison was the fight for control of the Reese-Dejeans holding, though no less intensely contested. Among the unlisted securities, the outstanding portion of this stock was owned practically exclusively in southern California. Therefore the storm center of buying and selling naturally gravitated to Los Angeles.

From there Harmsworth & Co. sent with clock-like regularity their semi-hourly reports to Reese

and Rita at Tres Arroyos. On these advices the campaign for survival was waged. The Geneva Corporation, with Joel Corbin engaged to the full against them, wasted no finesse in their assault on the partners. Through "dummies" they owned much Reese-Dejeans stock in addition to that represented by Barton Kline's considerable block. This was thrown on the market. Prices broke rapidly. Investors were not interested in availing themselves of a falling market to buy into an unproved concern. And those who had purchased already with honest purpose through Davenport's advertising campaign became at once potential allies of the Geneva Company. For as quotations dropped alarmingly, many of these were "smoked out" and added their selling orders to a glutted market, where the partners were the only buyers. Entirely upon Reese and Rita devolved the Herculean task of keeping the stock from avalanching to a disastrous "low."

They met their problem as best they could. All of Jack's and Marcel's holdings went up as collateral to secure money borrowed on the closest margin they dared establish. With the proceeds thus obtained, Rita bought more stock, borrowed again on that, and bought again.

But Reese-Dejeans stock continued to fall notwithstanding. In spite of all efforts to bolster it up, the decline continued. In three days it slumped to twenty-nine. Up to that time Rita had been buying sparingly — just enough to retard the fall and

keep the bottom from dropping out of the market. But at that figure she was compelled to purchase heavily, for at twenty-five — as her father had predicted a month before — the banks would be forced to close out the partners to protect themselves.

On the strength of these purchases, the price steadied momentarily. It even rallied a few points. But then more selling orders flooded in, and the downward march was resumed. But more slowly. On the fifth day of Geneva Motors' drive — a Saturday — the market closed at twenty-seven and three-quarters.

Rita breathed a sigh of relief when the Los Angeles brokers sent in this closing quotation at noon. Dark circles showed under her tired eyes; her shoulders drooped from the continued strain of five days of intensive effort. Jack had done what he could to help, but the main burden had been hers. And she was thankful — more thankful than she would have been willing to admit — for the over-Sunday reprieve which would give her tattered nerves and overtaxed body the needed time for recuperation. Monday, moreover, would see the staging of the final assault, she believed, and she would require all of her physical resources to meet it. As soon as Jack finished going through the mail just brought in by the office boy, she would ask him to drive her home, she decided.

She watched him covertly as he worked, with an almost maternal interest. He was such a boy

— so impetuous and independent. She wondered if he fully realized the desperate nature of his situation. Hardly, she thought. He had such unlimited faith in her ability, a faith only matched by his sure belief in the Reese-Dejeans motor. He had never doubted that her assistance alone would bring him victory. How distressed and humiliated he would be then — even disappointed in her, perhaps — if he were to know that she had already made arrangements secretly to aid him financially when the climax came. She could not help him much; most of her personal fortune was in Corbin Motors, and that had been forced upon her unwilling father in the interests of the larger battle he was waging unfalteringly from a sick bed — so far, successfully. There wasn't much left to draw on; only a few thousand. But she hoped it would help.

A slow frown overspread Jack's face as he ran through the last letter in the pile. His clouded eyes lifted from the page, dropping quickly again when he saw that Rita was watching. He tried bravely to smile.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked anxiously. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. Only a letter from Marcel — the first since he telegraphed that he reached the track safely. And everything is going along nicely, but — well, to tell the truth, I'd counted a lot on the new supercharger of ours to win the race for us, Rita," he confessed. "And now Marcel writes that both the Fiat and Mercedes entries are

equipped with practically the same improvement! I only wish I could ——" He stopped, not wishing to distress the girl with the news that his immediate presence at the Capri Track was necessary — urgently so, if he were to hope to compete in the Girard Race with any chance of personal success. But Rita understood.

"You'll have to go up there at once," she proposed bravely. "I can easily take care of the finish of this trouble down here ——"

"Do you think you could, really?" Jack burst out eagerly. "But, no; it wouldn't be right. It would be like deserting. I'm not much good here, I know, but "— he swallowed hard —" I'm going to stay."

Rita came over close to him.

"You've got to go, Jack — you must. In another way, the winning of the race is just as important as holding our own against Geneva Motors. You've got to win that race!"

"Torrano can do that for us if it's humanly possible. He knows more about driving in a minute than I do ——"

"But he doesn't know a tenth what you do about the Reese-Dejeans motor," Rita interrupted. "He can't possibly get as much out of it. And if the Fiat and Mercedes both have superchargers too, it's bound to be nip and tuck. Besides," she prevaricated, "we've broken the backbone of the Geneva attack. They played their trump cards to win today, and they failed. Monday or Tuesday

will see us on safe ground again, I'm sure. So go, please; I want you to."

"Well, if you're sure," Jack gave in gratefully, accepting Rita's statement of the market situation without question. "I wouldn't for the world want to leave you to face the music alone if I could help in any way, but — frankly, I *am* needed up there. Marcel asked me to come at once." He paused, doubtful again. "But perhaps I'd better stay over until Monday and see how things start breaking."

"No." Rita shook her head firmly. "They need you up at the track; you must leave early in the morning. This afternoon and tonight I'll help you get things in shape to leave here; and we'll work out a plan of campaign that will make my part easy." She forced a gay, disarming smile. "So that's settled, and I'm going home to lunch with Dad. But we can make up for lost time by having dinner down town."

"So be it then," Jack agreed appreciatively. "You're a brick, Rita!"

For the girl that afternoon and evening were interminable. Her whole being crying out for rest, for relaxation, perceiving clearly the tremendous crisis which would be hers to face alone on Monday, she yet accepted gladly the burden of a hundred and one other responsibilities which Jack gave without suspecting into her keeping. Practically, he was leaving the Reese-Dejeans factory under her management. Power of attorney, duly attested by

a notary, was made over to her, along with authorization to sign checks. In a way it was all the most profound compliment Jack could accord her, thus trustfully giving her full sway over his financial destinies. And he did so without hesitation — taking at face value her assurance that the added labor and responsibility would be no strain upon her.

But finally, at a late hour in the night, all plans and routine business details had been whipped into shape suitable for leaving in Rita's care. Jack locked his old desk and handed the key to the girl.

"Here's your scepter," he laughed. "You're monarch of all you survey."

"Home, James," Rita smiled. "That's my first royal proclamation."

"Tired?" he queried solicitously. "I'll just bet you are ——"

"No, only sleepy. It's so quiet here in the factory with all the machinery still and no one about excepting the watchman."

Reese was concerned. With the future at stake, with time at a premium, no thought had entered his mind of any question attaching itself to their present situation — alone together in a deserted factory at near midnight, with only a watchman making his casual rounds from time to time. Even though he knew that the girl had intended no such suggestion, the thought distressed him. He told her as much.

"I'm sorry, Rita," he finished abjectly. "But somehow — well, you've been such a loyal pal and all that I never gave a thought to conventions. They just didn't seem to exist."

Her tired eyes lifted and met his. He was dizzily aware of looking from an excessive height into the deeps of a soul unveiled and crystal-clear.

"They don't exist, Jack — or shouldn't," she said quietly and with simple earnestness, "not when people understand each other as we do. It isn't necessary to apologize. I'm glad that you could have felt that way."

Like the surging of a tempest over a storm-tossed ship, Reese's pent-up emotions beat against the stubborn will to keep his love a secret. And like the crashing masts and tangled cordage that mark the triumph of the elements, this resolve was swept away.

Rita had said that they understood each other. That was true. Why, then, should impending fortune or failure give pause to an unsaid phrase which would no more than voice this understanding? He began to speak haltingly — trying to assemble his chaotic thoughts into some semblance of order.

Suddenly he stopped. Into the factory had penetrated the sound of a muffled cry — an alarm, and at the same time a call for help! Jack sprang to the office door alertly, listening. For another tense moment endured a profound silence, intensified by the eerie call preceding it. Then came the

shattering echo of a revolver shot. Another moaning cry. Silence.

Hand in hand with Rita, Jack raced down the aisles of machinery shrouded and ghostlike in the dull glow of the few incandescents left burning all night. As he threw back the door opening on the factory grounds, he heard off to the right the drone of a motor fleeing into the night. To the left, toward the frame warehouse, sounded the soft, sucking cough of a wounded man — shot through the lungs, Jack guessed. And from the center of the warehouse itself — where the paint shop and its highly inflammable materials were located — came the dull, angry glow of rising flames!

With Rita huddled beside him, Jack paused momentarily, stricken in the doorway, to curse incoherently Geneva Motors and Barton Kline, who — as if their dollars were not enough — sought further advantage with the torch of the incendiary and the lead of the murderer.

CHAPTER XX

JACK had hold of himself again in an instant.

"They've shot old Denny the watchman and fired the warehouse!" he cried. "I'll see what's to be done for him; and you —'phone for help as quickly as ever you can, Rita. You're not squeamish about going back to the office alone, are you?"

For answer she sped back into the factory gloom. Guided by weakening moans, Reese ran to where the wounded watchman lay huddled on the ground. The man was dying. But he was still conscious, and he strove desperately to speak. Jack eased him to a sitting position and that seemed something of a help. For a time, however, the tremulous lips formed only a meaningless mumble, choked upward from lungs seeped by internal hemorrhage.

"I can't understand you," Jack said at last. "Is it something you want to tell me? Can you hear me, Denny?"

The gray head nodded slowly and painfully. And while precious moments that might have been used in urgent salvage work sped away, Jack waited patiently to hear. Finally, summoning the last remnant of his failing strength, the watchman spoke again — intelligibly. The words tripped out between lengthening pauses.

"Caught him — firebug — comin' from the

paint shop. Tall, skinny — feller — rat face. Seen him before — somewhere. Got to — get — him." A red froth came to his lips as he tried gamely to arise.

Jack held him back gently.

"Plenty of time for that, Denny old man," he soothed. "You'll have to take it easy now." His voice became harsh and menacing. "Massey will pay for all this, I'll give you my promise."

"Got to — get — him myself. My — job," Denny iterated stubbornly, obsessed by the one idea of his duty. "Got to — got — to — got —" The voice rose shrilly on the last faltering word. The body, straining weakly against Jack's encircling arms, fell suddenly slack. The gray head drooped forward, a gasping rattle coming from the throat. The glaring headlights of an ambulance, answering Rita's summons with a speed unavailing against the hand of death, swept into stark relief the sad tableau of a faithful servant's passing: A still form being laid back to rest on the spring green of the factory quadrangle by a bleak-eyed man whose features mirrored a grim determination and hatred no more cold and immobile than the murdered watchman's face.

In the space of minutes the quadrangle became a bedlam of noise and confusion. The ambulance hastened away with its burden, making way for the clanging apparatus of the Tres Arroyos Fire Department. Webs of hose appeared by magic, leading from hydrants into the billowing smoke and

flames. A fire engine, pumping madly, sucked salt water from the edging harbor and shot a powerful stream onto the blaze. A dozen willing volunteers assisted Jack in saving the office records. Several Reese-Dejeans touring cars, ready for shipment, were rolled from under the sagging roof in the nick of time.

But otherwise the desperate fight was unavailing. The core of the blaze could not be reached. And a stiff sea breeze swept the flames along the shingled roof implacably. Smothered in one place, the fire raged with increasing fury elsewhere, mocking the deluge of water. And within the paint shop exploding barrels of oil and varnish and benzine threw sprays of molten flame to every side.

With gray dawn the holocaust was at an end. Hosemen still played their streams over the smoking ruins, wetting down the ashes; but there remained nothing to be saved. The twisted skeletons of body frames and chassis obtruded through the charred embers that had been the storage place of surplus stock. Blown cans and hoops, eaten half away, marked the remains of the paint shop, where the heat had been the most intense. An adding machine, standing grotesquely on splayed-out metal legs, formed a worthless gravestone over the otherwise obliterated office. Two hundred thousand dollars — only partially protected by insurance — had gone up in smoke. The fireproof factory still stood undamaged, but that was worthless without the auxiliary building which was no more. The

Reese-Dejeans factory would have to shut down for the time being; production must cease until insurance could be adjusted and a new and smaller assembly plant be erected. And worst of all, for the present, this disaster was bound to cause a further slump in stock quotations.

All these things Jack perceived as he and Rita, side by side, ended their sad vigil in a smoke-shrouded Sabbath dawn. The girl had stood staunchly by throughout the long hours of the night, refusing to desert. And now was the zero hour for which she had remained. For as the rising tide of morning light revealed more and more the stark completeness of the ruin, the moment had come, she knew, when even Jack's paramount faith and courage must stand the test of a creeping, insidious despair.

"Jack!" she breathed softly.

He started. A film seemed to drop from his eyes as he turned toward her.

"What is it?" he asked blankly. "I didn't hear you, Rita."

"That adding machine over there," she nodded, smiling. "Isn't it too funny? Can't you imagine the manufacturers featuring it in a big magazine ad, with a caption like this: 'Our sterling model 6F. Even the destruction by fire of the Reese-Dejeans assembly plant and office couldn't upset it!'" she extemporized. "'Below, Mr. Jack Reese, who credits it as the inspiration that enabled him to win the Girard Cup Race!'"

A slow smile broadened over Jack's cinder-smudged face.

"Come on; I'm going to take you home," he laughed. "As an advertising genius, you fail to register, Rita. But," he added keenly, "the moral hits the spot!"

"Then," the girl queried anxiously, "you'll go up to the track today or tomorrow as we planned? You'll drive the race?"

"Absolutely! I'm leaving this morning, as soon as I've taken you home and told our sales manager how to go about cleaning up the business end of this mess. He'll have to shoulder a part of the extra burden along with the rest of us." Reese's jaw was set. Rita's laughing quip had bridged for him the breaking point. He was ready to carry on again — to a finish. "We've got to play to the grandstand from now on, first of all, to keep our distributors in line," he continued purposefully. "We've got to win the race. And if you can only keep us out of bankruptcy meanwhile, Rita, we'll still pull through. Because *we're going to win the Girard Race!*"

Jack was still buoyed up by this self-imposed promise when he boarded a late morning train northbound to San Francisco and the Capri Speedway. His leavetaking of Rita had been of the briefest: A hesitant good-by at the Corbin door, a parting exchange of understanding glances from weary eyes.

"Good luck, Jack," Rita said. "And remem-

ber that I'm expecting you to capture the checkered flag. That's what they always use, isn't it, to signify the winner?"

"I'm not certain yet," Reese smiled; "but I'll know for sure after I've run my last lap — home, here, to — to thank you for all you've done for me."

That was all. But the memory of it, of Rita's quickly downcast eyes and murmured farewell, remained with Jack as a talisman during all of the difficult days that followed.

Late Monday morning, after a refreshing night's rest in San Francisco, he accompanied Marcel out to the track. The little Frenchman had been horrified at news of the disastrous fire, but he shared Jack's belief that Sam Massey could not much longer elude the dragnet spread to effect his capture. He had escaped the Tres Arroyos police doubtless through an intimate knowledge of the surrounding country, but to elude the detection forces of an entire State was quite another question for the fugitive murderer to solve.

"He ees as good as caught zis time," Dejeans prophesied; "and zen ze rat will talk to save maybe ze neck!" He went through a vivid pantomime of attaching a hangman's noose. "Me, I t'ink it ees Monsieur Kline will not sleep so well after zat — in jail!"

"I hope you're right," Jack said, "for Denny's sake and Muldoon's. And after the race, I hope, we'll be able to offer a big enough reward to

make the police step livelier. Right now, though, we haven't a dollar to spare. In fact, if we don't have a lucky break, it's very possible we'll be closed out by our creditors before the race. Our stock has dropped 'way down, and people in general — and our stockholders in particular — naturally take that to mean that our car is no good. We can't publish the inside story, of course, and Geneva Motors is playing all its cards to finish us off before we get the chance to prove ourselves in the race. Rita — Miss Corbin is doing her best to keep us off the rocks meanwhile; but it's going to be a mighty close shave for us the next two weeks, any way you look at it."

The little Apache cast a sharp glance at his worried partner. He made no answer, but his small gimlet eyes narrowed abruptly in some sort of shrewd calculation, and his nervous body remained hunched forward in a humorous posture of concentration until the track was reached. There he hurried ahead of Reese to the pits, where Torrano was already tuning up in preparation for his daily practice run. The diminutive dark Frenchman and the blond Italian — close friends already — engaged in a short, low-voiced conversation. Torrano nodded shortly and with a quick word of instruction sent his grinning mechanician off on an errand. Marcel rejoined Reese, whom he led, vouchsafing no explanation, back through the tunnel and up into the deserted grandstand.

"Wait!" he said, pointing.

Torrano was cutting out onto the track in his Reese-Dejeans racer. Beside him in the cockpit sat his mechanician, returned from his errand to the friendly official timekeeper — who had since loitered to a post beside the starting bridge in company with a couple of reporters detailed to cover track happenings.

The racer glided away down the stretch, rounding the bowl at an ever-increasing pace. As it blurred past the grandstand again, Torrano raised a signaling hand. The waiting timekeeper clicked down the lever of his stopwatch. With a drumming roar, the racing car swept on. Three times more it passed under the starting bridge before the Italian waved another careless signal to the " clocker " and coasted on in a final lap back to the pits.

" Sacre damn!" Marcel cried admiringly, " zose Wop ees ze one beeg fool for speed, eh?"

" He knows his business," was Jack's sufficient compliment, " and he surely turned a couple of mighty good laps. But why arrange the demonstration all for my benefit, Marcel?"

" Voila! you shall see!" Dejeans hastily led the way back to the infield. With a wide grin, he hailed one of the reporters hurrying off to a telephone. " Somezine doing?"

" Something is right, Frenchy!" the other responded amiably. " That crazy Dago has busted all track records wide open, that's all — two seconds to the good almost, the timekeeper says!"

Jack was duly elated; but he was not to appreci-

ate fully until he next saw Rita what an invaluable service Torrano had rendered him through Marcel's shrewd intercession. News of the record-breaking three laps was a feature story in all the Monday newspapers appearing from noon on. It immediately installed the Reese-Dejeans piloted by the Italian as an even favorite with the sensational Fiat to take first honors. It gave the car thousands of dollars worth of free advertising. And, most important for the moment to the partners, to a large extent it nullified the moral effect of the assembly plant's destruction; it heartened the few "die hard" stockholders who had thus far refused to sacrifice their investment to hold on until after the Girard Race at least.

Actually, these few shareholders now held the balance of power which could make or break Jack and Marcel. On Saturday Geneva Motors had exhausted the last of their holdings in a bombardment that had just fallen short of swamping the market. In this they had been tremendously assisted — as anticipated — by the widespread panic arising among the less courageous investors in Reese-Dejeans stock. And the firing of the warehouse had been the final ruthless move to stampede the stubborn few.

But the news of Torrano's amazing feat forestalled this in the nick of time. Balancing precariously Monday noon at twenty-six — held at that only by the employment of all but a fraction of the few thousand Rita and her brother Gordon

had scraped together for the secret purpose of assisting Jack — the market suddenly steadied, became dormant. The few outstanding selling orders were hastily canceled. And Rita's bid of twenty-six and one-half for fifty shares, offered as a feeler just before the exchange closed, went begging.

Geneva Motors and Barton Kline had failed for the time in their drive to sell out the partners for a song. Upon the result of the Girard Race would hinge the ultimate destiny of Reese and Marcel Dejeans. If they won, this tentatively reëstablished confidence in their product would mean a decided advance in the market value of their stock; it would mean that the Geneva Corporation's unscrupulous scheming to ruin them would result only in giving them practically complete ownership of outstanding shares at a fraction of their worth! On the other hand, failure in the cup classic would cause a sure drop in the market, bringing total loss of their holdings to the partners!

Rita's letters to Jack made clear the decisive nature of the impending race; and he, with strengthened optimism, bent every effort toward driving it as a worthy team mate of the dare-devil Torrano. For his part, the Italian was amazed at Reese's instinctive mastery of the fine points of track craft. It was not too much to hope, he soon predicted, that two Reese-Dejeans racers would finish in the money; but then — a Latin shrug — the unexpected must be expected in the racing

game. There were other fast entries to be considered besides the Fiat, a sister car to the season's champion on the Continental speedways.

Aside from the daily grind in preparation for the cup classic, however, Reese found his spare hours full to overflowing with a multitude of tasks. Rival architects were already submitting rough drafts of plans for the new assembly plant, and these had to be given tentative approval or rejection. Then there were two or three evening conferences with the underwriters before a satisfactory settlement of the large insurance claim could be effected. And it was a rare occurrence for Jack not to find at least one drummer for mechanical or office equipment awaiting him in the lobby of the modest San Francisco hotel where he and Marcel were staying.

But all this rested lightly on Reese's shoulders. For he was daily becoming more sanguine of victory in the Girard Race. Torrano continued reeling off laps at close to record time; and day by day Jack crowded his team mate more closely in the practice brushes the likable Italian delighted to test his mettle with. And the Reese-Dejeans, thanks to its superior type of supercharger, had demonstrated from the first that it had the fastest "pick-up" of any car on the speedway.

Reese was not overconfident. He was more than qualified to judge the merits of his motor and his own ability as a pilot. Against more than

one German Flying Circus — with death the penalty for error — he had gauged to the saving fraction the power of rival motors and the maneuvering skill of guiding hands.

With racing experts in general also according the Reese-Dejeans at least a fifty-fifty chance of winning, Jack was not surprised to receive word from C. J. Gilpin that he would attend the race. The wealthy distributor proposed to combine pleasure with business, however, his long night letter to Reese revealed. He would attend the race and immediately thereafter embark on a long-projected ocean trip through the Panama Canal back to New York. The *Prince Rupert* sailed at six from San Francisco, making a connection too close for the transaction of business immediately following the race. Could Reese and his partner, therefore, convenience him by accompanying him as his guests as far as Los Angeles, where the *Rupert* touched en route, for the purpose of closing their proposed contract?

Jack accepted this proposal gladly — though he thought at the time, with ironic amusement, that Gilpin's reception of his guests might be far from cordial if victory failed them; and in that event, of course, no contract would be forthcoming. However, the distributor's whims must be given consideration, so Reese sent an affirmative answer. Moreover, this arrangement gave him the opportunity to do a good turn for his hustling San Francisco agent. He had previously planned that

he and Marcel should drive the two racers back to Tres Arroyos and store them there until the next racing season. But Gilpin's invitation permitted him to offer the cars to the local agency for display purposes.

The delighted agent, in return, insisted that the partners accompany him out to one of the famous cafés on the Beach for an informal banquet the night before the race. Inasmuch as Marcel was keen for it and the two racing cars were under close and efficient guard, Jack agreed; his own nerves, too — keyed to the highest pitch by these last hours of waiting — would benefit as much as those of the dynamic little Frenchman through the diversion, he felt.

After an enjoyable evening of cabaret entertainment, the local distributor returned them to their hotel at shortly before midnight in the agency "demonstrator." But before either of them could clamber from the touring car, a bell-hop on watch for that purpose espied them and came running out to the curb.

"Here's a telegram for you, Mr. Reese!" he said, proffering the yellow envelope. "And they've been ringing you for almost an hour over long distance from Los Angeles. They offered the clerk fifty dollars if he could locate you at once!"

Reese handed the boy a tip and hastily slit open the envelope. The message was from Joel Corbin, characteristically brief and to the point. A low ejaculation — almost a moan — escaped Jack's

tightening lips as he read, first to himself, then aloud to Marcel:

"Rita missing since late afternoon. Trail clear to Los Angeles in company of man answering Massey's description. Meet me at Clark Hotel there at earliest possible moment.

"JOEL CORBIN."

CHAPTER XXI

JACK wasted no time in useless speculation about the whys and wherefores of Rita's mysterious disappearance. He gave no thought to the great sacrifice involved in a prompt response to Joel Corbin's urgent plea for aid. Only the girl mattered now — her safety; and whatever he could do would be done gladly, unhampered by any petty regard for his own uncertain fortunes.

"I've got to get to Los Angeles," he said simply, "at once, the fastest way possible."

"But good Lord, man!" the agent remonstrated; "you'll miss the race if you go! You'll ——"

"I'm going!" Reese cut in grimly. "I've got to; I want to. You don't know what this means to me, Benson. You don't know Massey — a desperate murderer, capable of anything! I've got to go; and God knows I can't get there half soon enough to ——"

But the agent was already sliding from the seat of the demonstration car. Reese's brief explanation was enough to have enlisted all his support.

"Pile in! You're a racing driver," he said, "and here's the fastest stock car on the Coast. Burn the rubber off her, I won't give a damn. Give her the gun and let her rip, buddy! Get moving!"

Jack didn't attempt to offer thanks. A quick,

firm handclasp, a flashing glance of gratitude, and he was behind the wheel of the low-hung touring car.

"Gas?" Marcel shrilled the question as he swung onto the running board.

"Almost full," the agent shouted above the rumble of a motor already under way.

Shaking free of the traffic on Market Street, the Reese-Dejeans gradually picked up a racing speed. Through the night its powerful headlights blazed a way down the curving reaches of smooth highway that marked the beginning of the coast route to Los Angeles. Towns flashed behind at frequent intervals — a blur of arc lamps along practically deserted streets. Then rapid acceleration, a faster lifting and falling of smooth-sliding pistons, a louder drone from the unfaltering motor. Faster and faster.

There was no sensation of unusual speed. The low-hung machine held smoothly to its course. The miles slid behind in less than an equal number of minutes. A funnel of light bored far ahead into the distances still to be traversed. Darkness closed instantly upon the wake of the flying Reese-Dejeans.

Jack held the wheel effortlessly. He was forcing the car to its utmost, but the passing hours revealed no weakening in either slave or master. Not one only, but both, seemed made of untiring steel. The mechanical perfection of one was matched by the grim determination of the other.

He must get to his destination in time, must save Rita. Over and over this repeated itself, like an endless chant, to the rhythmic diapason of the motor plunging him every minute more than a mile closer to his goal.

Every minute! But the minutes were as endless as the miles. And what if he were too late? But he mustn't be! Rita, beckoning, expectant, trustful of his coming, filled his mind, flashed before his eyes like a mirage — and like a mirage retreated away and away. Jack did not know, as he followed the specter, of the curves he took at a giddy angle, nor did he feel the accompanying sidewise "roll" that sometimes made even his hard-bitten little companion wince. But Marcel said nothing of this then or thereafter; there was good reason for haste and — *voila!*— weren't they partners?

At something after two o'clock a stop for gasoline was made; again shortly before dawn. On each occasion Marcel suggested that he be given a turn at the wheel. And each time a negative shake of the head was the only answer given him. As Los Angeles drew near, however, Jack was forced to slacken his breakneck pace. But notwithstanding, the dust-coated touring car pulled up before the Clark Hotel as dawn was breaking.

Hatless and disheveled, followed by Marcel, Reese burst into the hotel lobby, aroused the dozing night clerk ungently and demanded that Mr. Corbin be notified instantly of his arrival.

"He's expecting me," Jack said. "Please hurry!"

For what seemed an interminable time the clerk fussed with his index file. Then he looked up, puzzled.

"We have no Mr. Corbin for a guest at present," he said. "Are you sure you have the right hotel?"

"Positive!" But to make doubly sure, Reese snatched the crumpled telegram from his pocket and spread it out. "Clark Hotel; there it is," he pointed. "He must be here!"

"Sorry," the other replied, "but we have no record at all of his registering. Possibly he was delayed."

"Maybe ze telephone, eh?" Marcel suggested, meeting Jack's bewildered glance.

Jack nodded and hurried off to one of the public 'phone booths, where he called the Corbin home in Tres Arroyos. It seemed a silly thing to do under the circumstances; but in this last perusal of the telegram from Rita's father he had noted that the sending point was Tres Arroyos. And there might be something in the clerk's suggestion of a delay. Joel Corbin had by no means fully recovered from his recent illness, Jack knew, and his recuperative energies were still being exhausted in the prolonged battle with Geneva Motors. It was possible, then — more than possible — that this excitement attending Rita's disappearance had brought on ——

A sleepy voice was answering across the wire.

"Has Mr. Corbin started for Los Angeles yet?" Jack demanded anxiously. "Has he ——?"

"Mr. Corbin?" the other repeated dumbly.

"Yes, where is he? Good God, can't you —!" Reese fell back, mouth agape, at the interrupting reply. "In bed — asleep? Impossible! Why—"

"Who is this speaking, please?" the annoyed voice from the Corbin mansion insisted.

"Mr. Reese." Jack began a rapid explanation, but was again interrupted shortly. It seemed that there must be some grave mistake — the butler was more gracious now that he knew with whom he was conversing — for Miss Corbin was also asleep! She had retired at shortly after ten! But perhaps Mr. Reese would like to speak to her personally to assure himself of her safety?

Jack would care to — and did. And in a matter of moments the whole grisly hoax was exposed; and its sinister purpose as well. The telegram had been sent by some one unknown to prevent the partners from competing in the Girard Cup Race, to lure them so far away that their chance of returning to the Capri Track in time for the starting of the event would be infinitesimal!

But Reese refused to accept defeat. He refused to consider Rita's plea that he was exhausted from the long drive south (she was curiously insistent about fixing the exact time and circumstance of his leaving San Francisco, he thought); and he refused to admit that he couldn't return to the track in time to drive the race. Now that Rita was

safe, a hot flame of anger was surging through him. He had been tricked and cheated of his chance by — who else could it be but Barton Kline? And he had fallen into the trap like an idiot. But there was still a slim chance of turning the tables, and that slight chance he proposed to play to the limit.

"I'm going to try to make it back in time, Rita," he told her. "I can't quit cold. Good-by." He missed the faint answer returned to him. He was already running toward the hotel entrance.

But Jack found as the morning progressed that speed was unavailing where it must be held in check. During the first hours progress was satisfactory; but after the sun was well up, sixty miles an hour was the maximum pace he dared set. Often considerably less. Traffic was heavy on some stretches. Motorcycle officers patrolled others. And it became imperatively necessary to stop for some sort of hasty meal.

On reaching Santa Barbara, Reese was forced to admit the absurdity of his impossible attempt.

"We're beaten to a frazzle, Marcel!" he smiled gamely. "I was a fool ever to try it, but I was seeing red for a while there. Anyhow, they can't rob us of our appetites. Let's eat! Then we'll tool up to the track in time to see Torrano bring home the bacon."

"Ze whole peeg!" Marcel grinned. "Me, it ees zat I am 'ongry enough to eat even ze damn' *Boche* sausage now. And zose Wop will win, Jacques,"

he tried to hearten his disappointed partner. "Wiz any car, he ees good; wiz ze Reese-Dejeans — pouf!— he ees ir-re-zeestable!"

Marcel's prophecy proved at least half true when the Capri Track was finally attained, after a further setback in the schedule on the congested Peninsula highway. For with only twenty-five laps to go, the Reese-Dejeans and the Fiat were running almost a dead heat! Both had lapped the field time and again. Both had been favored so far with perfect racing luck. At no time had more than a minute separated the two! The most spectacular duel in the history of speedway racing was drawing rapidly to a close with no more than a hundred yards dividing the maroon Reese-Dejeans and the once-white Fiat. And Torrano, waving a nonchalant hand to the madly cheering stands at every circuit, was leading!

Twenty laps to go and only two lengths divided the roaring monsters! One length after five more grueling circuits. Torrano was waving no more. He was bent over his wheel, fighting for every opening that would increase his lead an inch, hold it, even. The spectators were on their feet, shouting hoarse encouragement.

Back by the pits Reese and Marcel watched silently. This matter of a few dividing feet was too supremely important to their futures for them to rise to any of this holiday exuberance. On it depended an order for one hundred cars a month, the difference between assured and immediate suc-

cess and a slow upbuilding process, hampered by a top-heavy debt which might still bring them to ruin if victory failed them.

Torrano clung stubbornly to his lead as the Reese-Dejeans and the Fiat flashed under the starting bridge into the last lap. Wide open they swept past, the Italian hugging the inner rail, the Fiat tailing him in the next lane. At the far turn Torrano swung out to pass the Perris — Geneva Motors' entry, which still held on though hopelessly outclassed. But as the Reese-Dejeans swung, the Perris swung also — crowding the Italian upward toward the curving shoulder of the bowl in a gross violation of track rules. The Fiat dropped to the empty lower rail and sped on.

So did Torrano! After his first moment of confusion at seeing the Perris come quartering toward him, he steadied into a new lane and plunged straight ahead! Then the driver of the Perris lost his nerve. To avoid collision with the Italian, who stood ready to forfeit his life rather than be further victimized, he swung desperately away.

A groan went up from the spectators. Came the crash of rending, sundering metal! The Perris, steering knuckle broken by the sudden strain, rolled over and over from the track, coming finally to rest, a broken, crumpled thing, not more than a hundred feet from where Big Jimmy Muldoon had lost his life the year before! The driver, once faithless to Muldoon's trust in him, now hid-

den somewhere under that tangle of metal, had been visited with a retribution for which not even the Geneva Corporation's gold could repay him.

Torrano drove on to a finish — a length behind the Fiat.

CHAPTER XXII

SECOND! A few thousand dollars. Hardly enough to have paid the construction cost of one of the Reese-Dejeans racers — even were it not all, and more, to revert to Torrano as the price of engaging him for pilot. And the Italian had earned his reward in full measure: Jack did not at all begrudge him his pay. The thought that rankled and ate deep was that first place had been lost not through lack of ability or a failing motor, but through a deliberate foul; that the driver of the Perris eight, dead though he now was, had purchased with his life another potential victory for the Geneva Company.

Reese-Dejeans stock might go up, notwithstanding. It probably would react upward to a certain degree now. But there would be no notable advance such as victory and the consequent flat guarantee from C. J. Gilpin could have brought. It would take years of the hardest work, two or three at the least, Jack estimated, to gain the advantage that a single stroke of Gilpin's pen might have given instantly. Meanwhile, Rita — it wouldn't be right to ask or expect her to wait. Especially as Geneva Motors might yet strike deeply against the partners, what with small production at first hardly profitable enough to repay the interest on a debt greatly enlarged through recent stock purchases.

Engrossed in these moody speculations, Jack followed Marcel from the Capri Track and accompanied him, without enthusiasm, to the San Francisco pier from which the *Prince Rupert* was to sail within the next half hour. They went aboard immediately; and by the time they had stowed away their luggage in the comfortable stateroom allotted to them, the *Rupert* was backing into the channel.

Reese's wonted cheerfulness began to revive. He was about to propose to Marcel that they take a turn around the deck to brace themselves for the impending interview with Gilpin when a steward came to the door.

"Mr. Gilpin in 413 has asked to see you gentlemen immediately," he delivered his message. "Rather in a hurry, he said he was."

Reese and Dejeans exchanged understanding glances.

"Well," Jack smiled thinly, "guess we might as well get the agony over with first as last, Marcel. And C. J. evidently feels the same way about it. So here goes!"

In a few moments they were knocking at the door of the wealthy distributor's cabin.

"Come in!" a testy voice called; and the partners filed into the room, heads up and shoulders thrown back unconsciously, as if they were entering a prison death chamber where theirs must be the part of doomed men meeting death unflinchingly.

With such anticipation, at least in effect, C. J. Gilpin proved to their first glance to be grossly miscast for the rôle of executioner. The wealthy distributor, tall, and dyspeptic-looking, with a sparse tangle of gray hair fringing his skull, lay full length on his berth sucking a lemon!

Jack introduced himself and his partner. Gilpin answered with a curt nod, without so much as rising to a sitting position. Nor did he apologize for the omission.

"Nothing like a lemon to stave off seasickness," he mumbled. "But it always gets me more or less the first day or so out. Have to take precautions. But guess we can settle our business before I succumb. Open that suitcase there, please, and hand me the large envelope you'll find right on top."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gilpin," Jack began, handing over the bulky packet. "Having seen the race, you know of course that Torrano was deliberately fouled for the purpose of preventing his winning first place. But I suppose you think it peculiar, at the least, that I forfeited my own chance, whatever it was. I want to explain ——"

"Not at all required!" Gilpin rasped. "Saw it all in the paper before the race ——"

"In the paper?" Jack echoed.

"Of course! All of them featured it, naturally. There's one sticking in my overcoat pocket if you haven't seen it yet. Must have driven like the devil to get back here to meet me. Rather sur-

prised. Grateful to you, too, I must say." A grimace that might have been intended as a wink contorted the visible side of Gilpin's face. "Good heads you boys have on your shoulders. Great advertising stunt. Worth thousands, and you got it gratis. A new wrinkle in the prima donna's lost-jewel gag, eh?" he rattled on. "But you had to deliver the goods to get away with it. That record will stand for years."

With a muttered apology, Jack opened Gilpin's newspaper while the latter was busying himself with the documents in the envelope. He was completely at sea to find rhyme or reason for the older man's bewildering remarks. But only until the paper was spread out before him. Fronting him was his own picture — one evidently rescued from wartime files in a newspaper "morgue." Above was the caption: "American Ace Shatters All San Francisco–Los Angeles Speed Records In Daring Midnight Dash!"

A sudden light dawned on Reese. Now he knew the reason for Rita's peculiar insistence last night in fixing the time of his start from San Francisco. The girl — bless her!——

But Gilpin was interrupting, querulously.

"My stomach's beginning to feel a bit uneasy," he said. "Let's hurry this business through. Here is the contract in duplicate, ready for our signatures if it's satisfactory to you."

"You're ready to sign — now?" Jack queried almost in a whisper.

"Certainly. That's what I asked you here for, isn't it? The contract stipulates a win in the Girard to validate it, but we can initial that out. This new Los Angeles road record you've set up more than equalizes that. And the press will have to give you credit for a victory even if you were robbed of it by that damned renegade driving the Perris!" Gilpin had half raised himself in the heat of his anger. He gulped suddenly and lay back. "On second thought, you'd better look through the contract in your own stateroom and see me in the morning after I've got on my sea legs." He rolled over with his face to the wall. "Please go — quickly — and ask the steward to bring me another lemon!"

Lost in wonder and elation, the partners obeyed. By the time they had reached their stateroom, however, Jack had recovered from his first amazement. He seized a piece of paper and penned a brief message to Rita, to be sent by wireless from the ship.

"How's this for a proposal, Marcel?" he grinned.

"Gilpin signs contract thanks to you. Stop. On last lap now. Stop. Will you meet me at Los Angeles Harbor pier where Prince Rupert docks to give me checkered flag dash for life. Question.

"JACK."

"Sacre damn!" Marcel cried admiringly, "zat ees ze grand in-spir-r-ation. Me, I also will send ze one to Madame McGuire!"

On leaving the wireless room, the partners took a turn around the deck. Night had fallen. The *Rupert* was steaming along smoothly, well past the choppy " Potato Patch " where Gilpin had met his Waterloo. Over the stern showed the fading twinkle of lights at Land's End.

" Great, isn't it?" Jack sighed. " With all our windfall of luck, I haven't any right to complain, but — Lord! wouldn't it be perfect honeymooning on the *Rupert* now, heading south for those lawless little banana republics and the Spanish Main?"

As he spoke, a tall, studious-looking man, wearing smoked glasses, detached himself from the rail close before them and hurried off toward a companionway. Reese gave the man only a casual glance, but Marcel stopped abruptly, his bright little eyes squinting rapidly. Then, as the retreating figure paused uncertainly, glancing down a well lighted passageway, the diminutive Frenchman plunged in pursuit. With a cry of mingled rage and triumph, Marcel threw himself bodily onto the back of the hesitant one!

In an indescribable tangle of arms and legs, the contestants rolled to the deck. But before Jack and a ship's officer, coming from opposite directions, could reach the point of combat, a decision had been reached there. Sitting astride his victim was Marcel, the point of his short stiletto hovering closely enough above the other's windpipe to discourage further resistance! And the scholarly one's smoked spectacles were gone, along with a

very cleverly chosen wig. In utter amazement, Reese found himself looking over Marcel's shoulder into the ferret face and fear-dilated eyes of Sam Massey!

Jack quickly sketched the situation to the mate, who laid a competent-enough Scandinavian hand on Massey's shoulder and bade the partners follow to the captain's cabin. The captain listened with pursing lips to Jack's charge.

"Do you admit these statements of Mr. Reese's, sir?" he asked the cringing prisoner.

"I admit nothing; I refuse to speak!" Massey snarled. "I——" His ferret eyes flickered toward Dejeans and remained fixed on him as if hypnotized. But when Jack and the Captain of the *Prince Rupert* followed the horrified glance, Marcel was assiduously engrossed in whittling the thinnest of shavings from a lead pencil with his razor-edged knife. With this finished, the little Frenchman handed the pencil to Massey with an elaborate bow.

"Ze confession, eh, Monsieur?" he suggested blandly. "Me, it ees zat you will please me by writing it, eh?" Close to each other now, there was something readable in Marcel's beady jet eyes visible to Massey alone. And Massey, whatever he saw there, was sufficiently impressed to accept the pencil. For Dejeans' earnestness of purpose, his absolute disregard of consequences, would have struck home to a far braver man than was Barton Kline's craven accomplice.

The confession was written! Once he fully realized that the jig was up, Massey took a sort of perverted pleasure in entangling his enforced master in the inextricable web of evidence his pencil wove across the pages of the confession. If Massey was never to attain the sanctuary of a Central American republic where an absence of extradition laws would have made him safe, at least he took every precaution to assure himself that Barton Kline would suffer with him. Perhaps pay the same penalty. For the confession contained certain gruesome evidence relative to Dolly Landon's continued disappearance following the party at the Corbin home.

Leaving Massey finally to the mercies of the ship's authorities, the partners hastened to the wireless room. An answer to each of their messages was awaiting them. Standing at the taffrail, with the *Rupert's* white-crested wake trailing far behind along the moonswept waters, Jack opened the Marconigram addressed to himself. A tender, boyish smile curved upward his firm lips as he read with eyes at last free of haunting shadows the six short words that answered the one question which was to him important above all others:

"I will dash. Exclamation point.

"RITA."

He turned to Dejeans, who was leaning disconsolately over the rail.

"What luck, Marcel?" he questioned, with just

a trace of anxiety, for he had long perceived a fact to which Marcel was apparently blinded — that Mother McGuire, for all her splendid qualities, was at least fifteen years the diminutive Frenchman's senior. "Did she accept you?"

A dejected shrug, more eloquent than words, came for an answer.

"She said you were too young for her, of course?" Jack said, commiseratingly, to spare his friend's feelings.

Marcel Dejeans turned a wry grin upward. Even his disappointment was not proof against his Gallic sense of humor.

"Sacre damn, no!" he smiled. "Me, it ees zat Madame says I am for her too old!"

THE END

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